OLD!

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO CLASSIC

retro GAMER

GAME GEAR MICRO

SEGA INVENTS A NEW BREED OF HANDHELD CONSOLE

AM… …ORE | SEGA | NINTENDO | ATARI | SINCLAIR | NEO GEO | SONY | COIN-OP | MO…

STAR WARS REBEL ASSAULT

LEARN THE SECRETS OF THE FMV HIT

The Return Of ALEX KIDD

MONSTER HUNTER

KANAME FUJIOKA LOOKS BACK AT HIS BEASTLY PS2 RPG

HOW MIRACLE WORLD BECAME A MIRACLE HIT
PLUS: INSIDE THE SUPERCHARGED REMAKE

ALSO INSIDE

ASTEROIDS
CHRIS CANNON
CALIFORNIA GAMES
FUTURISTIC RACERS
TEKKEN 3 BLACK TIGER

THE SETTLERS

BEHIND THE SCENES OF UBISOFT'S LONG-RUNNING RTS FRANCHISE

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BBC MICRO

11 UNDERRATED GEMS TO PLAY ON ACORN'S CHILD-FRIENDLY SYSTEM

FUTURE
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TRIBUTE

PANZER PALADIN

ENGAGING ACTION-PLATFORMER WITH FUN AND INTUITIVE SWORDPLAY!

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SUMMER 2020

NINTENDO SWITCH

WISHLIST NOW ON STEAM

THE RETROBATES

WHAT FRANCHISE DO YOU WANT SEGA TO REVIVE?

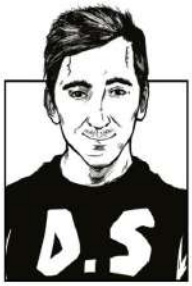
DARRAN JONES

Now Sega owns the *Thunder Force* IP, I'd like a brand-new 2D shooter with eye-melting visuals and an ear-thrumming soundtrack.

Expertise:
Juggling a gorgeous wife, two beautiful girls and an award-winning magazine, all under the same roof!

Currently playing:
Mega Cat Studios Collection 1

Favourite game of all time:
Strider



DREW SLEEP

We've had a good run of fighting games of late, but there's one franchise that's been notable in its heartbreaking silence. Give us a new *Virtua Fighter*, god damn it!

Expertise:
Impeccable home office construction

Currently Playing:
The Last Of Us Part II

Favourite Game of all time:
Final Fantasy VIII

NICK THORPE

If I can finally have *Virtua Fighter 6* after so many years of waiting, I'll never ask Sega for anything again. Okay, maybe *Sonic Mania 2*.

Expertise:
Owning five Master Systems and a Mark III

Currently playing:
Alex Kidd In Miracle World

Favourite game of all time:
Sonic The Hedgehog

ANDY SALTER

Golden Axe as a sort of fantasy co-op *Just Cause*/survival-type game, with *Dark Souls*-style combat and a *PUBG*-style multiplayer thrown in for good measure.

Expertise:
Modding games, no 'vanilla' versions for me, thanks!

Currently playing:
Mount And Blade 2: Bannerlord

Favourite game of all time:
Rome: Total War

IAIN LEE

Crazy Taxi, please. Absolutely nothing like it, one of the most adrenaline-fuelled games of all time. Let's have a 2020 reboot!

Expertise:
Buying overpriced stuff on eBay then never touching it

Currently playing:
Minecraft Dungeons

Favourite game of all time:
Elite (BBC Model B)

PAUL DRURY

I'd like *Crazy Taxi* in VR with the option to earn big bonus money if you give your passengers motion sickness and they soil the vehicle.

Expertise:
Hidden Liverpool Videogame Tour

Currently playing:
The Last Of Us Part II

Favourite game of all time:
Sheep In Space

PAUL ROSE

Comix Zone for me. Would love to see what they could do with current technology.

Expertise:
Winging it

Currently playing:
The Last Of Us Part II

Favourite game of all time:
Half-Life 2

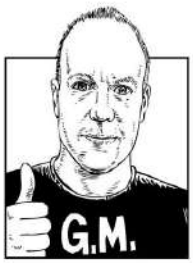
RORY MILNE

Sega's technicolour fever dream of a shooter *Space Harrier* would be my choice. The franchise's insane speed, responsive controls and trippy visuals just never get old.

Expertise:
The game that I'm writing about at the time of writing

Currently playing:
Gnibbly's Day Out

Favourite game of all time:
Tempest



GRAEME MASON

Having enjoyed *Streets Of Rage 4* recently, an update of another Mega Drive fave... *Golden Axe* would be rather ace.

Expertise:
Adjusting the tape azimuth with a screwdriver

Currently playing:
Fallout 4

Favourite game of all time:
Resident Evil 4

LOADING...

There can't be many Master System owners who weren't aware of Alex Kidd. Sega's big-eared mascot had a great run on the 8-bit console and he got off to a brilliant start with the excellent *Miracle World*, which many later Master System gamers would experience as a pack-in; at least until that blue hedgehog came along and upset the apple cart.

Back in the day, you were either an Alex Kidd fan or a Mario fan, as they were the prominent platform stars of their respective consoles. I was clearly on Alex Kidd's side, and a highlight of my young gaming journey was seeing Alex's amazing crossover with the *Shinobi* franchise. Before long, though, Alex fell out of fashion and as Sega concentrated on the exploits of Sonic, the monkey boy was soon forgotten about.

Granted, he's appeared in numerous cameos in the past decade, but there was nothing to suggest we'd ever get another game, let alone one based on his original 8-bit adventure. I'm delighted, then, to not only offer you a feature on the Master System original, with valuable insight from Rieko Kodama, but to also delve into the brand-new remake which is on the way and is looking very nice indeed.

There's plenty more retro brilliance to discover in the issue and make sure you take advantage of our *Pac-Man* subscription offer on page 28 if you haven't already done so.

Stay safe and enjoy the magazine!

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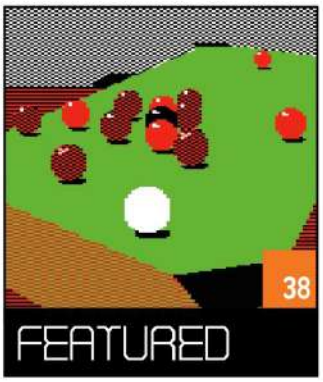

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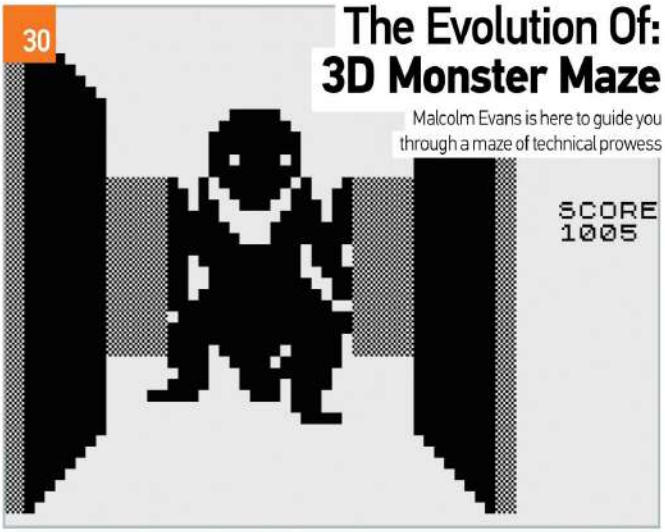

The Evolution Of: 3D Monster Maze
Malcolm Evans is here to guide you through a maze of technical prowess

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LORD SUGAR'S MARVELLOUS AMSTRAD MUSEUM

The Amstrad founder is looking to build a collection of his past products and put them on display – but which machine does he regret making? Words by David Crookes

Boredom can lead to great ideas, and that was starkly the case when Amstrad founder Lord Alan Sugar revealed plans to buy up his old products and use them as the basis of a new museum. He spoke of his desire after social media users began tweeting him photos of their retro Amstrad machines. "Nothing much inspired this desire to revisit the past other than having nothing else to do at the moment," he tells **Retro Gamer** in an exclusive interview.

The proposal emerged at the height of the coronavirus pandemic and it could have been seen as a throwaway remark. But Lord Sugar is serious about bringing his computers, hi-fis and even the odd E-mailer together in one place, and he's started to flesh out his plan. "I'm thinking of taking one of my warehouses somewhere and just allocating a space where I can collect all these things and put them nicely on display," he says. "I just decided it could be useful to start collecting these items."

Like most of the world, Lord Sugar has been in lockdown, albeit in a lush apartment in Florida so the plan may have to wait until he returns to the UK. He's not been short of support, however, with fans of the company immediately bombarding him with offers of help – or at the very least items they've dragged down from the loft and are willing to sell.

Roland Perry, Amstrad's former group technical consultant who played a pivotal role in the development of the CPC and PCW range, is keen to get involved – "I've got a few things but would be happy to help co-ordinate a larger collection," he tweeted). The Centre For Computing History in Cambridge says it is ready to assist, too.

One thing's for sure, however: this isn't set to be another money-making venture for the 73-year-old tycoon who launched his electronics company in 1968 selling car aerials from a van on the streets of London's East End. "I won't be trying to make a business out of it," he tells us. "It will be a personal

> **"I just decided it could be useful to start collecting these items"**
> Lord Sugar

Photo by SSPL/Getty Images

thing for myself but if Amstrad people want to come and see it, then I'll make it accessible for them."

Lord Sugar has seen his computers on display in museums in the past. At the start of the year, for instance, he drew attention to a CPC 464 on display at the V&A Museum Of Childhood – "Right next to the Xbox," he tweeted. He also mentioned seeing an Amstrad PC1512 in a computing history section curated in the reception of Google's headquarters. "Centre stage," he wrote, proudly.

This, however, will be a chance to create a full-on celebration of his past products, once again showcasing them to large audiences. "We used to spend hundreds of thousands of pounds every time we had exhibitions and press conferences," he recalls. "And we had absolutely loads of them. They were very big, especially the launch of the PC1512. There must have been 2,000 people in the Queen Elizabeth Conference Centre in Westminster for that."

There are certainly many shoe-in items for an Amstrad museum. The firm's first product, the CPC 464, would surely figure, as would the CPC 664 and CPC 6128. Lord Sugar remembers them all fondly. "I got in at just the right time when the British and European public were ready to get into computing," he says of their launch, recalling that the decision to enter the market was a simple one.

"Companies such as IBM and Compaq had created an air of mystique around computing and, as a consequence, their prices were ridiculously high," he continues. "I came in with a consumer electronics head on, and I looked inside these computers and saw there was quite a lot in there but not enough to warrant the prices that IBM was charging. So we broke the price barrier and that was it. We became the largest supplier of computers in Europe."

The machines included the PCW range launched in 1985. "That was my idea," Lord Sugar says. "I wanted to make an all-in-one word processor with a printer, screen and floppy disk at a price everyone could afford. We then created an IBM-compatible so we were in the market for games, word processing and professional computing. Amstrad grew tremendously fast – 1984, 1985, 1986 and 1987 saw massive growth."

Amstrad bought Sinclair Research in 1986 for £5 million – and the Amstrad versions of the ZX Spectrum could also make it into the museum. "Clive Sinclair was good at marketing but the product was unreliable and that was one of the reasons for his downfall, really," Lord Sugar says of his once-rival. Not everything Lord Sugar touched turned to gold, mind. The GX4000 console launched in 1990 was a flop, while the E-mailer ten years later is only said to have broken even. Are they something to celebrate?

"We shouldn't have produced the GX4000," Lord Sugar confesses. "We were hardware people and the key to that market was software, or games." He also rues the issues Amstrad suffered with the Seagate ST277R hard disk that shipped with the PC2386 – a mess that caused such bad press that Amstrad lost its European lead in the PC market.

"We spent too long investigating what went wrong, assuming it was our design rather than both Seagate and Western Digital shipping us duff drives. Seagate paid us $130 million but it was too late." Such tales would work well in the museum, particularly when put against Amstrad's many successes.

"I really threw Amstrad into the computing market: Germany, France, Spain and Italy were huge for us and we caught them at the right time," he concludes. Add to that the groundbreaking twin-deck hi-fis, lucrative set-top boxes made for Sky Television and the firm belief in offering low-cost value tech to disrupt the market and Amstrad certainly made an impact on consumer electronics. "I've been sent pictures of items that I'd completely forgotten I'd made so it'll be great to see them again," he laughs. ✱

Credit: Johann H. Addicks/Wikipedia

» The PCW range was produced between 1985 and 1998. This model – the 8512 – is on display at the National Museum Of Computing, Bletchley Park.

» Amstrad computers – such as the PC 1512 – sold well across Europe. In Germany, the company partnered with Schneider which branded the machines under its own name.

» Lord Sugar may regret launching the GX4000 but the console has a firm fanbase.

THAT BELONGS IN A MUSEUM!

The sweet products Lord Sugar should be snapping up for his collection

AMSTRAD CPC 664

Amstrad replaced the tape deck of the 464 with a internal three-inch floppy disk drive but the decision to include 64K of memory meant it was produced for just six months before being replaced by the CPC 6128. Codenamed IDIOT (Includes Disk Instead Of Tape), it sold just 70,000 units, making it a relative rarity.

AMSTRAD STUDIO 100

The Amstrad Studio 100 mixing and recording system was the first to come with a twin tape deck but the company incorporated the feature in most of its subsequent stereo systems – attracting criticism from the British Phonographic Industry (BPI) for allowing prerecorded cassettes to be copied at high speed.

AMSTRAD PENPAD

The PenPad was a personal digital assistant released in 1993, boasting decent handwriting recognition and a monochrome LCD touchscreen. Based around the Zilog Z180 CPU, it went up against the Apple Newton but sold poorly. "We gave up on the PenPad too soon," Lord Sugar remembers. "PalmPilot came out after that and sold millions."

WESTONE RELIC UNEARTHED

NIN Games has announced that it will be releasing *Clockwork Aquario*, a 1992 Westone arcade game previously thought to be lost, later in 2020. The 2D platformer was the final arcade game developed by the company, and was designed by *Wonder Boy* director Ryuichi Nishizawa. *Clockwork Aquario* began development in 1992 and was built for the Sega System 18 board. The modern versions will be available physically through Strictly Limited Games and will also receive digital releases.

LIGHTNING STRIKES TWICE

A complete and unpublished *Days Of Thunder* game for the NES has been found and preserved by the Video Game History Foundation. It had been worked on by the late Chris Oberth, who was then a coder and designer at Mindscape. A backup spread over more than 20 floppy disks was found, and it was possible to build a complete ROM image after some rigorous data recovery. The game, which has now been released with the blessing of Chris' family, is wholly different to the released version from Beam Software.

MICRO MACHINES

SEGA UNVEILS ITS LATEST RETRO CONSOLE PROJECT

» It'll be interesting to see if this diminutive device is comfortable to use.

In news that was more than a little bit of a surprise, Sega has chosen to celebrate its 60th anniversary by announcing a whole range of retro mini consoles – and in the process, became the first major manufacturer to create a mini console based on classic handheld hardware. The Game Gear Micro is a tiny recreation of Sega's first handheld console, released to commemorate the system's 30th anniversary. Four models are being created, with each utilising a different colour scheme based on ones used by the original Nineties models. The differences are more than cosmetic, as each different coloured system also comes with its own unique line-up of games.

In keeping with the Japanese trend for keychain-sized gadgets, the tiny unit is less than 40% of the size of the original console, just 3.15 inches wide with a 1.15-inch screen. Unlike the Mega Drive Mini, which was an accurate scale recreation of the original console, the Game Gear Micro does make some alterations – most notably larger buttons, in order to help with playability. Power can be supplied via two AAA batteries, for three to four hours of play time, or via Micro USB cable. As with Sega's Mega Drive Mini, M2 is handling the emulation and has provided options including save states. However, none of the systems include multiplayer capabilities, and other common features such as television output will not be included.

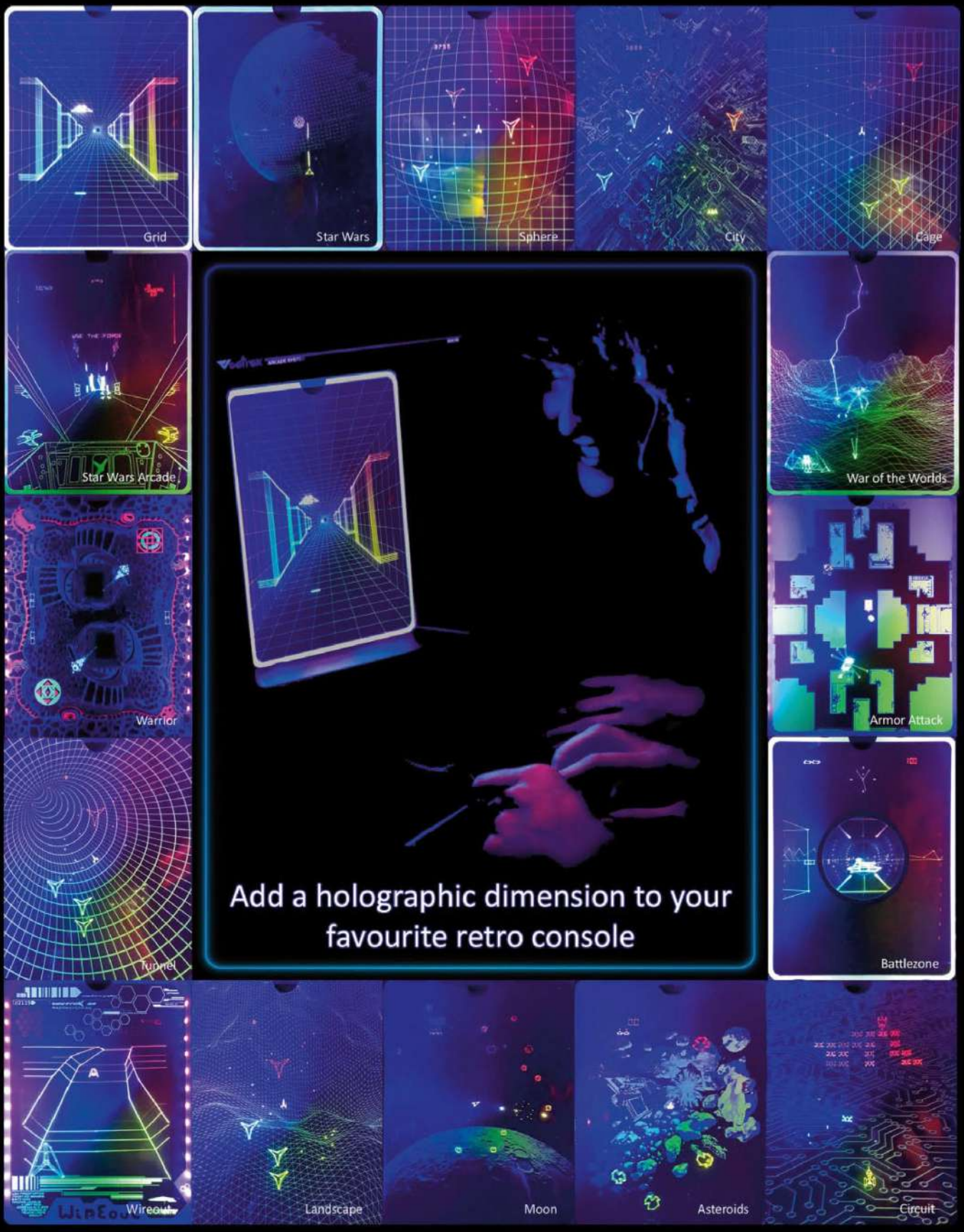
Each model comes with just four built-in games, and as usual there is no official way to expand the selection. The black model is tailored towards big names and comes with *Sonic The Hedgehog*, *Out Run*, *Puyo Puyo 2* and the tactical RPG *Royal Stone*, a Japan-only sequel to *Crystal Warriors*. The blue model is aimed at more hardcore Sega fans and includes *Sonic & Tails*, better known here as *Sonic Chaos*, M2's excellent *Gunstar Heroes* conversion, block puzzler *Baku Baku Animal* and the action-RPG *Sylvan Tale*. The yellow model is geared towards *Shining Force* fans, featuring *Shining Force Gaiden*, *Shining Force Gaiden II* and *Shining Force Gaiden: Final Conflict*, as well as the mission-based *Puyo Puyo* variant *Nazo Puyo*. The red model is intended to represent Atlus, purchased by Sega in 2013, and includes the *Megami Tensei Gaiden* games *Last Bible* and *Last Bible Special*, as well as *The GG Shinobi* and *Columns*. Notably, Sega has chosen not to license any third-party games for these systems.

» With just four games per system, more casual retro fans may shun the Game Gear Micro.

The Game Gear Micro has so far only been announced for release in Japan, where it will be released on 6 October 2020. Each model is individually priced at ¥4,980 (approximately £36), with a bundle package of all four also available. The release is quite limited, with the consoles only available via Amazon, Rakuten and the Sega Store, with individual outlets offering special bundle packs for four console sets, including pin badges and a decorative Game Gear Micro with smoke coloured casing respectively.

While we do like the concept of the Game Gear Micro, we'd be surprised to see the system released in this fashion beyond the shores of Japan, as initial fan reactions were critical of the high price and low quantity of games. However, if this release is as limited as Sega has suggested, the device may well be prized by collectors in years to come. We'll keep track of any developments, and aim to bring you a closer look at the system in due course.

UV OVERLAYS FOR VECTREX



BLACKLIGHTER.CO.UK

Who is Iain Lee?
Iain Lee is a freelance broadcaster who loves gaming, particularly retro gaming. Join him as he hosts a phone-in show and plays games at www.twitch.tv/iainlee and also check out www.patreon.com/iainlee.

Give it a waggle

This monthly column, if you can call this belch of words I nervously deliver every month a 'column', is a constant reminder that I am now old. Things that I thought happened relatively recently in my life turn out, after a little scrutiny, to have happened *decades ago*. 30 or 40 years in the past. When I was a teenager, 40 years ago was World War II. Now it's my childhood.

What's made me feel old this month is realising that, when I was playing the addictive yet annoying game *Gang Beasts* with my eight-year-old on the PS4, I asked him what the keys were. Fair play to my kids, they know their old man is old, so they understand such archaic language. For those out of the loop, it refers to old computer games from the mid-Eighties that were played on a keyboard. Everyone had their preferred keyboard setup and I think you can tell a lot by a person as to what keys they used. Any sane gamer would have 'Z' and 'X' as their left and right and ':' and '.' As their up and down. Anything else is just perverted and wrong.

The reason we used keys is because joysticks were rubbish in the Eighties, with a few notable exceptions. For my money, the greatest stick of all time has to be the original Atari one. A solid black beast that sits nicely in the palm of your hand, allowing you to grip it and waggle in front of the TV vigorously. The black is offset by a singular, red button. God knows what it's made of but I have never heard of one breaking (feel free to correct me on that).

The second greatest joystick is the Spectravideo Quickshot. It's less reliable but looks so beautiful. That perfect grip, the two stunning red buttons at the top… it's a beast. The only thing that lets it down is the autofire, a cheater's option as far as I'm concerned.

Being a BBC Micro owner, I was denied all of these pleasures because there were hardly any joysticks for the Beeb. I did have some weird rectangular thing that was kind of long and looked old-fashioned even by 1984. But the thing that really ruined it was there was no auto-centering. If you moved the thin stick left, it stayed on the left. It was absolute rubbish, hence me asking my kid about keys.

I convinced people on Twitter recently that my dad had invented the word 'joystick'. One of my half-sisters who I don't know that well sent me a message asking if that was true and how proud she was of our father. I felt terrible telling her he didn't and it was probably invented by a French pilot in 1909.

Hang on, is this the most Freudian piece I've submitted to **RG**? I talk about my kids, my dad and the most phallic of gaming peripherals. I think maybe lockdown is getting to me! *

> "I convinced people on Twitter recently that my dad had invented the word 'joystick'"

Do you agree with Iain's thoughts? Contact us at:

RetroGamerUK @RetroGamer_Mag retrogamer@futurenet.com

COVID

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SIGN UP

Who is Paul Rose?
Paul is probably better known as Mr Biffo – the creator of legendary teletext games magazine *Digitiser*. These days, he mostly writes his videogame ramblings over at Digitiser2000.com. If you want more Biffo in your eyes, you can catch him as the host of *Digitizer The Show* at www.bit.ly/biffo2000.

The great escape

It's kind of telling that one of the few industries not affected – at least in terms of sales figures – by the COVID-19 pandemic has been gaming. Generally, games sales have increased in recent months. The NPD Group – an American market research organisation – reported that software sales were up 34% in March from the same time the previous year, with hardware soaring a staggering 63% over 2019. Certainly, as the modern games industry hurtles towards a new generation of hardware like a wayward drunk, this is pretty much unprecedented.

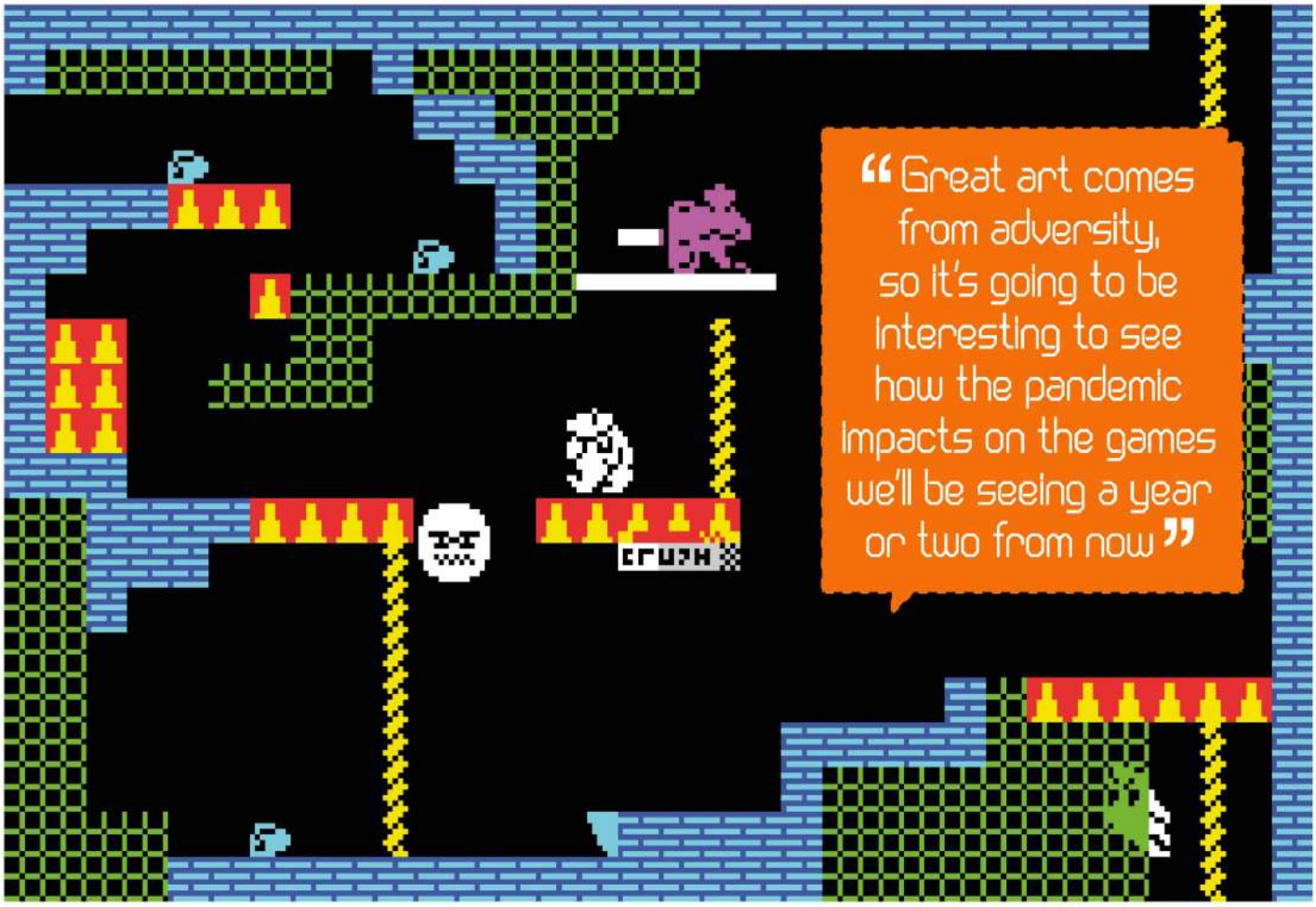
So why is it happening? For my money, the rest of the world is waking up to what we've always known; games are an escape from everyday life. As hardware has become more advanced, we're effectively experiencing theme parks in our own homes. Certainly, the games I played most during the peak of lockdown were VR titles; just to get that feeling that I'd gone somewhere and done something. Plus, of course, games are more communal than ever. You couldn't go on social media over the past couple of months without seeing people inviting one another to visit their prized *Animal Crossing* islands.

Games have always been that way for me and – I suspect – most of you. It's why we've never given up playing them. It's telling that most of the tough times in my life I can link a certain game to. *Bugaboo The Flea* (no, really), *Underwurlde*, *Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare*, *Alex Kidd In Miracle World*, the little-loved *Rage*... to name just a few of the games I disappeared into, so that I could – for a while – forget about the storms raging elsewhere.

I don't know if it's because games let you become someone else, or because they transport you somewhere new, or whether the cocktail of adrenaline and dopamine is a balm on a troubled soul, but it's probably a combination of all those things. This year especially, when time seemed to slow to a crawl, having the opportunity to let rip with a pretend shotgun in *Doom Eternal* was exactly the fight-or-flight boost I needed.

Great art comes from adversity, so it's going to be interesting to see how the pandemic impacts on the games we'll be seeing a year or two from now. We tend to forget that games such as *Jet Set Willy*, *Monty Mole* and *Urban Upstart* were products of their time. Not just because of their visual limitations, but they're just three that were very much influenced – on a creative, imaginative, level – by the era in which they were created.

One of the big questions many creatives are now asking is whether to acknowledge the pandemic or ignore it. Do people want to be taken away, or do they want entertainment which reflects the world? I suspect it's a mix of both; take us away, but don't shy away from this insanity we've all lived through. It's one of the few events in our lives which we can say we've all been through together. ✱



"Great art comes from adversity, so it's going to be interesting to see how the pandemic impacts on the games we'll be seeing a year or two from now"

Do you agree with Paul's thoughts? Contact us at:

RetroGamerUK @RetroGamer_Mag retrogamer@futurenet.com

A dizzying website

The Oliver twins on preserving history and heading to Evercade

Philip and Andrew Oliver like to keep busy. Despite being in lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the developer duo have been doing plenty to keep themselves occupied, including setting up a new version of their website (olivertwins.com) and contributing a bunch of their *Dizzy* and NES games to a new Evercade collection. Here they tell us how both projects came about.

Why revamp your website?

Philip Oliver: Lockdown has us at home, and Andrew and I don't like being idle. For many years we've felt our website was really dated, but there was nothing we could do about it as it was hardcoded HTML from around 2008. We knew that one day we'd have to overhaul it and concluded that we'd have to do this ourselves. Thankfully, website editors have come a long way in the last ten years. It's a little more complicated than using PowerPoint, but not much, and there's no coding involved!

What have you changed?

Andrew Oliver: The concept of the site is fairly similar in that it had a brief overview of our early careers from playing games as kids and then learning how to make them, all the way through to making many best-sellers and setting up a games studio. The new website has taken that to a whole new level. We've got screenshots, reviews, adverts from the time and the longplay videos on each format, and most are even playable in the browser (sadly not on mobile). You can now see how the games and technology differed and improved over time. We think it's a great way for people to learn about the early days of the industry.

Why do you think classic games should be documented?

PO: We were lucky to enter the industry in its infancy. We had many ups and downs, and our careers are a good example of what those days were like for early game developers. We are fortunate that, being kleptomaniacs, we have a lot kept from those days so we are in a great position to act as spokespeople for the early days of the UK games industry, and, of course, we are proud of the games we made – some more than others, obviously!

How did the new Evercade compilation come about?

AO: Robert Peacock of PixelHeart, (a leading retro game publisher and distributor) contacted us in March. He said he was working closely with Blaze, and said they'd really like a *Dizzy* collection – as it's been requested on social media. I explained that we have made many other great games and some of those should be on the cartridge, too – games like *Super Robin Hood*, *FireHawk* and *DreamWorld Pogie*.

Why include the NES *Dizzy* games?

PO: Since the *Fusion* Kickstarter campaigns, we now have 11 great NES games, all of which have had very limited exposure due to the politics that surround them. The NES games have an elegance and art about them that is appreciated by retro game enthusiasts. It was hard to get these games to look and feel as great as they do given the limited technology and memory constraints.

Is it nice your unreleased games will reach a bigger audience...

AO: We made games to be played and enjoyed by as many people as possible. Money usually followed that enabled us to make more and better games, but sadly that never happened with these NES games.

» The Olivers never throw anything away and now you'll find all their adverts and press clippings documented forever.

» It's great that all profits of the new Oliver twins collection is going to charity. More of this please, Blaze.

» Considering the sheer popularity of *Dizzy*, it's unsurprising to find a whole section of the website dedicated to the franchise.

» Philip Oliver (left) tells us, "We feel our story can inspire and educate the next generation of game developers."

The charity proceeds are a nice touch, did you get to decide what organisation to support?

PO: Yes, the profits all go to charity, in line with an ongoing agreement we have with Codemasters with whom we share the IP rights. We chose to give the money to the National Videogame Museum as we are patrons and could see how badly they'd been hit by the Coronavirus pandemic.

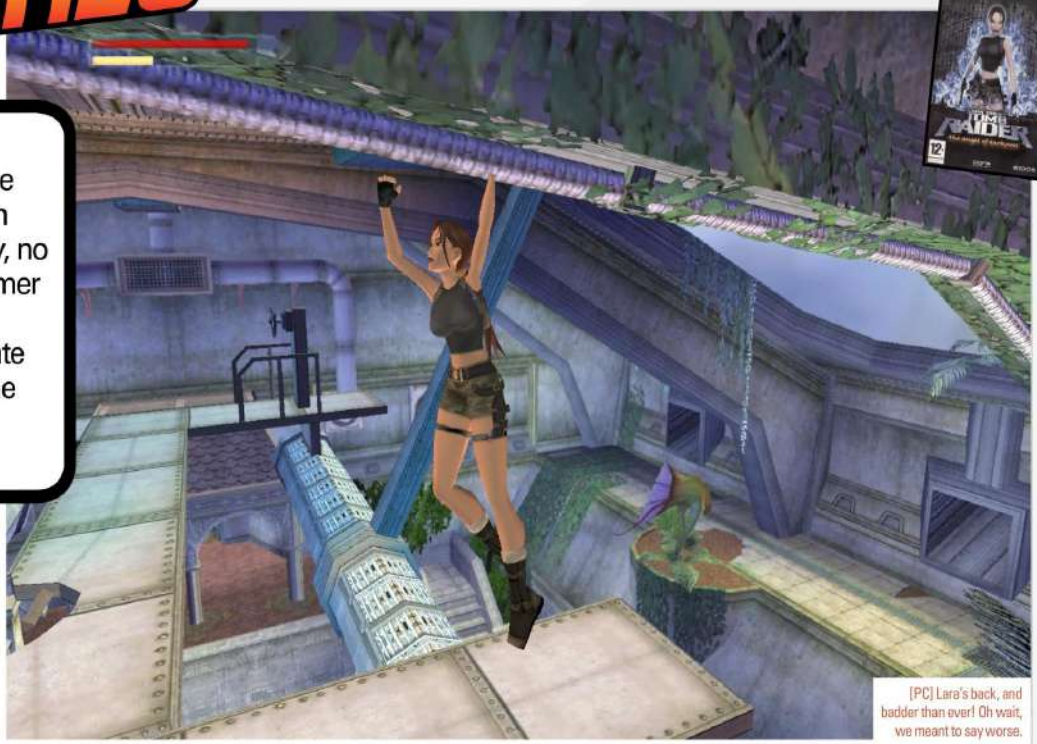
Why do you think the Evercade is gaining so much momentum with retro gamers?

AO: There have been many ways over the years to play classic retro games, but they were usually bootlegged and clunky. Retro fans are nostalgic and want to do right by those original game developers. Evercade offers an official way to conveniently play these games, either portably or on a big TV, with hardware buttons that feel close to the original experience. ✱

» [NES] The new Evercade collection will give you access to games like *Wonderland Dizzy*, which have had a very limited release.

BACK TO THE NOUGHTIES

AUGUST 2003 – As temperatures rise across the UK, are things heating up in the gaming market? Frankly, no – it's a standard-issue summer lull, with even the return of Lara Croft unable to generate much excitement. Time traveller Nick Thorpe investigates why



[PC] Lara's back, and badder than ever! Oh wait, we meant to say worse.

NEWS AUGUST 2003

Europe suffered a major heatwave in August, resulting in sweltering temperatures across the continent. In the UK, a record 38.5°C was documented at Brogdale, near Faversham in Kent, which stood until 2019. Trains were disrupted by buckling rails, melting ice caps in the Alps caused avalanches, and shipping was disrupted in Germany due to low river levels. Worse still, an estimated 70,000 people died across the continent, with France alone suffering 14,802 losses.

On 14 August, a massive power failure affected over 50 million people in the northeast of the USA and the Canadian province of Ontario – the second most widespread blackout in history at that point. Initial speculation pointed to lightning strikes as a cause, but it was later found to be a software bug in the system used by Ohio's FirstEnergy company.

Tragedy struck in Brazil on 22 August, days before a scheduled satellite launch, as a VLS-1 rocket exploded on its launch pad at the Alcântara launch centre. In this incident, one of the four first-stage motors accidentally ignited, destroying the rocket and causing a fire in the jungle nearby. The explosion killed 21 people stood on the launch pad, mostly scientists and engineers crucial to the country's space ambitions.

THE LATEST NEWS FROM AUGUST 2003

In the good old PlayStation days, Lara Croft was a reliable sort of lass. She'd turn up to star in a new *Tomb Raider* game every November, and inevitably the press would love it. *Tomb Raider: The Angel Of Darkness* broke both of those traditions. The game came in for a critical drubbing, despite heavy delays to fix its issues. "That this review is being written just days before the release of the game speaks volumes," said *Edge*, concluding its 4/10 review. "The lack of tight AI and the abundance of minor glitches suggests that Core could have done with another couple of months for fine tuning." In a 5/10 review, *games™* complained that "twitchy controls mean that instant death is just the flick of the analog stick away", and that the game consisted of "plodding around uninspiring passageways and around dingy exterior areas". Even *Play*, which gave the game a more positive 71% score, felt that the game's new additions "don't make the experience any more enjoyable".

If PS2 owners wanted to play something good this month, they'd need to take a look in rather less obvious places. Fans of intriguing concepts could look into *EyeToy: Play*, a minigame compilation taking advantage of Sony's new peripheral – a small camera that allowed for various types of motion-sensing games. *Edge* gave the game 8/10 and praised its accessibility, hailing the arrival of a multiplayer game that "doesn't just work among people who know how to hold a joypad", though it did feel that "three minutes per game is too long for this kind of activity". *Play* scored the game 83%, selecting Kung Foo, Mirror Time and Keep Ups as highlights of the package.

If you were so fortunate as to have access to import games, you could also consider a pair of 2D arcade blasters. SNK's run-and-gun *Metal Slug 3* scored 8/10 in *games™*, with the reviewer commenting that "the quality and amount of animation remains unmatched even now", though noting that it was "more than just a little unfair" at times. In *Play*, Cave's vertical scroller *Dodonpachi Dai-Ou-Jou* scored 82%, with the reviewer claiming that it was "the cream of the new breed of Japanese shoot-'em-ups". What does this new breed have to offer? "Rather than destroy every wave that comes under your sights, you will have to focus on

[Xbox] Smart cars have learned to fly. Great, that's just what we needed.

[PS2] Excitable box quotes declared *Mace Griffin "Halo* for PlayStation 2". It was not.

[PC] Activision publishing a World War II-themed shooter? Maybe that *Call Of Duty* thing will take off after all.

[PS2] *EyeToy: Play*'s easy-to-understand control system made it a hit with your nan and your nephew alike.

[PS2] Don't be fooled by the UK box art – *Metal Slug 3* was strictly Japan-only at this point.

dodging the swirling fields of enemy flak," we're told – essentially 'bullet hell', before the term would have been widely known.

Beyond that, the month's fare largely consisted of multiplatform efforts that were reasonable, but hardly spectacular. *Mace Griffin: Bounty Hunter* (7/10 *Edge*, 69% *Play*) offered a blend of first-person shooting and space combat, but *Play* felt it would have been better if "the developers had the nerve to try out some fresh ideas". *Speed Kings* (6/10 *XBM*, 6.7/10 *Cube*) was called out for "failing to do anything special that separates it from the crowd" in *Cube*, and *Play* felt that the stealth sections in *The Hulk* (69% *Play*, 6.4/10 *Cube*) "spoil an otherwise competent and playable game".

Of course, there wasn't a great deal going on with Sony's rivals, either. GameCube owners could pick up a rather good but somewhat belated port of *Hitman 2: Silent Assassin* (8/10 *games™*, 7.9/10 *Cube*), while Xbox fans had *Midtown Madness 3* to pick up. The open-world racer scored 8/10 in *XBM*, which enjoyed the ability to "take outrageous shortcuts through the Arc De Triomphe and underneath the Eiffel Tower", as well as the fact that the game didn't take itself particularly seriously. However, it did have a couple of reservations, particularly when it came to collisions. Innocent bystanders could flee but wouldn't be harmed if they failed to make it out of your way in time, and trees were bizarrely non-solid, with the reviewer complaining that, "If you're going fast enough, as with the pedestrians, you go straight through them with little or no impediment."

PC owners didn't fare much better. The clear highlight of the month was *Day Of Defeat*, which scored 8/10 in *games™*. This World War II-themed *Half-Life* mod had been picked up and packaged as a standalone game, as "the idea of *Counter-Strike* being played out in the ultimate theatre of war proved too much of a potentially lucrative concept for publisher Activision to ignore." Though its graphics were dated and it had no single-player component, the reviewer opined that the game's "level designs shine above so many other team-based shooters". Also on PC, Activision's *Star Trek: Elite Force II* received 6/10 in *Edge*, with the game described as a "reasonably impressive, if wholly conventional" FPS that suffered from "tedious, sudden-death platforming sections". *Ghost Master* seemed to be taking on *The Sims*, but *Edge* felt that it shared more in common with *Dungeon Keeper* due to its design that had players "using a team of ghouls to scare humans, thus boosting supernatural resources, which can in turn be spent on further scare tactics". Unfortunately, the reviewer felt that "the lack of structure makes an unholy pact with that lack of obvious action and reaction, draining the game of any tension or real thrills".

Join us again next month – *F-Zero GX* is coming, honest! ✱

CHARTS

AUGUST 2003

PLAYSTATION 2

1 – EyeToy: Play (Sony)
2 – Tomb Raider: The Angel Of Darkness (Eidos)
3 – SOCOM: US Navy Seals (Sony)
4 – Enter The Matrix (Atari)
5 – Formula One 2003 (Sony)

XBOX

1 – FIFA 2003 (EA)
2 – Brute Force (Microsoft)
3 – Halo: Combat Evolved (Microsoft)
4 – Project Gotham Racing (Microsoft)
5 – James Bond 007: Nightfire (EA)

GAMECUBE

1 – FIFA 2003 (EA)
2 – Sonic Adventure DX: Director's Cut (Sega)
3 – The Legend Of Zelda: The Wind Waker (Nintendo)
4 – Medal Of Honor: Frontline (EA)
5 – Lord Of The Rings: The Two Towers (EA)

MUSIC

1 – Breathe (Blu Cantrell ft Sean Paul)
2 – Pretty Green Eyes (Ultrabeat)
3 – Sleeping With The Light On (Busted)
4 – Complete (Jaimeson)
5 – Never Leave You [Uh Oooh Uh Oooh] (Lumidee)

THIS MONTH IN...

games™

In a feature on the endangered art form of 2D gaming, *games™* flipped the question on its head. "Will gamers come crawling back to sprites for a break from tireless photorealism or will it be time for something entirely new to take over, sending polygons the way they sent 2D?" As it turns out, we did come crawling back – many years later.

Edge

Why has the press not been able to play *Ninja Gaiden* yet? "I just don't think demos are necessary," says Tecmo's Tomonobu Itagaki. "If I were writing a book, would I be expected to create a demo for it? [...] Developers are so desperate to sell their games that they'll try anything to obtain a few extra sales." Isn't that why you develop games?

XBM

"Travelling for 11 hours across the Atlantic to meet a PR who works in the UK and lives an hour and a half down the road is the very epitome of an industry taking itself way too damn seriously," says pseudonymous columnist Lulu Latouche, who hates E3. We wouldn't know – they don't tend to show many Spectrum games there.

Asteroids

ROID RAGE!

» ATARI 2600 » 1981 » ATARI INC

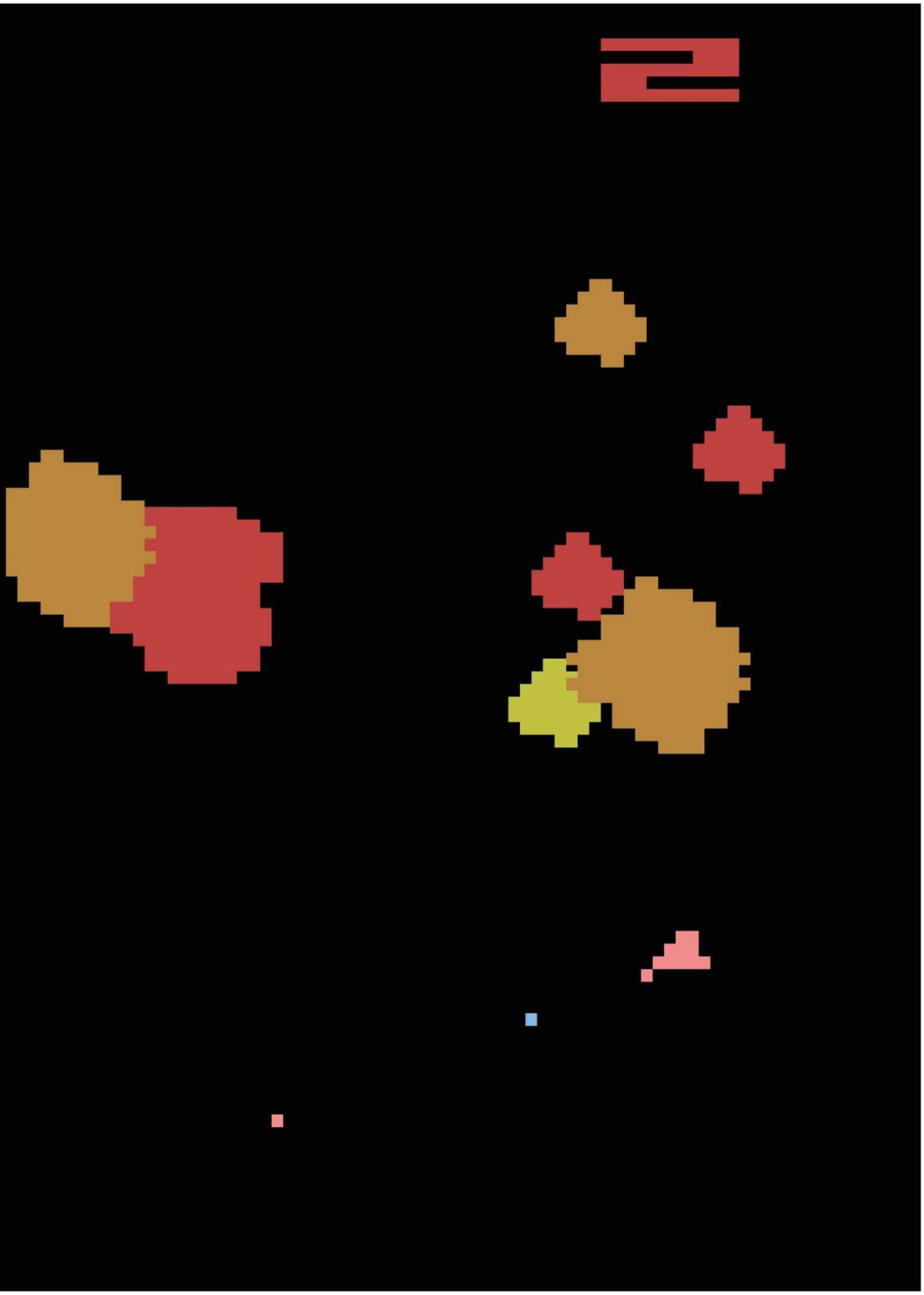
This might be a shock to some, but I've never owned an original Atari 2600. I've played the system to death, of course, because my best friend Paul used to own one (it's probably still in his loft now, actually). I've also come close to buying one many times, but largely, I've simply made do with owning various Atari compilations instead.

When my Evercade turns up (hopefully before you read this) the first game I'll be playing on it is *Ninja Golf*, mainly because I've never experienced it before, and I made a big song and dance about it on Twitter (@retrogamer_daz) so I now feel the need to stay true to my word. The second game I'll be playing, though is Brad Stewart's Atari 2600 adaptation of *Asteroids*.

I remember being incredibly impressed with *Asteroids* whenever I played it at Paul's house. I'd occasionally stay over at his home on weekends and we'd be allowed to play the 2600 on his parents' big colour TV. Typically, we'd play the various two-player game modes, taking it in turns to try and best each other's high scores. Lockdown is going to make any recreation of that impossible, so I'll play it the old-fashioned way – without friends.

A blast through it now highlights that it remains a decent version, and while it's clearly a little creaky in places, and the overall difficulty is relatively low, the core concept of Ed Logg's original arcade hit remains. There are far more safe spots on the Atari 2600 version, most likely due to hardware restrictions, so it's a lot easier to camp out while you wait for rogue asteroids to float by. Things do get more hectic as the bigger asteroids disintegrate, and the throbbing beat that accompanies the action certainly helps to stir things up, but it's nowhere near as action-packed as I remember it being.

Still, the ten-year-old version of me thought *Asteroids* on the Atari 2600 was absolutely amazing and easily the best arcade-style game on the console. Having said that, the ten-year-old version of me also thought sharks swam up your toilet when you used the loo. Basically, the ten-year old version of me was an idiot.



The Making Of Alex Kidd In Miracle World

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** SEGA
- **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE
- **RELEASED:** 1986
- **PLATFORM:** MASTER SYSTEM
- **GENRE:** PLATFORMER

As well as being the first game that many Master System players ever got their hands on, Alex Kidd's debut adventure was one of the system's best. Rieko Kodama joins us to look back at how this ambitious platform adventure came together

WORDS BY NICK THORPE

It has long been said that history is written by the winners, often as a lament by the defeated side of a conflict. This is as true in videogame history as it is in any other field, and if you ever needed proof, *Alex Kidd* should be all you need. As a figurehead for the Master System, he has often been derided as a '*Mario* clone' by fans of the more popular NES, and sidelined as 'Sonic's unsuccessful precursor' by those who found Sega during the Mega Drive boom years. But if you free yourself of the need to make such comparisons, *Alex Kidd In Miracle World* stands out as a very ambitious game for its era, and one that is still a fondly remembered introduction to console gaming for many players of a certain age.

It's fair to say that while Sega did have an eye on *Super Mario Bros*, the truth of *Alex Kidd*'s origin is far more interesting. In an interview for the 'Meisaku Album' section of Sega's Japanese website, translated by Shmuplations, planner Kotaro Hayashida (credited simply as 'Kotaro') explained the initial goals of the project. "Sega had just put out the new Mark III, and they tasked us in the Second Development unit to create something that would sell as well as *Mario*," Hayashida revealed. "Our initial plans were for an adventure game with action elements. It was something close to what we call 'action RPGs' today." In John Szczepaniak's book *The Untold History Of Japanese Game Developers: Volume 3*, Hayashida further elaborated that the game was actually intended as a licensed game. "First, Sega were planning on making a *Dragon Ball* game, but later we were told that we couldn't use the licence any more and we had to come up with our own idea," he said. "So, for example, when it was *Dragon Ball*, Goku fought with his Power Pole, but we changed that to a punch attack." This had been alluded to in the Meisaku Album interview, where Hayashida discussed how *Alex Kidd* originally fought with the Nyoibo (magic staff) before he "became more of an original character".

While the characters and world had been sketched by Hayashida, other people were required to bring them to life. The artist that designed Alex Kidd himself had previously worked on the Master System conversion of *Fantasy Zone*, and is only known by her pseudonymous credit Yoko Matilda. The name Alex Kidd was suggested by Hayashida's supervisor, *Flicky* designer Youji Ishii. In his interview with John Szczepaniak, Hayashida explained that his original choice of name was Alex Ossale, but that Ishii had preferred a name that played to the game's young audience. This was originally Alex Kid, before Kidd was adopted as a proper surname – something that may please the ▶

» Rieko Kodama is a Sega legend. She joined the company in 1984 and has worked across many of its landmark titles.

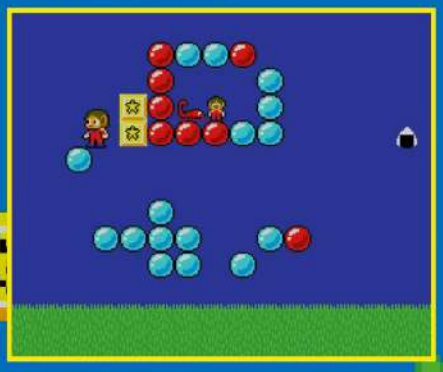
» Héctor Toro is an artist for Jankenteam and a big fan of *Alex Kidd*. He's currently adding his own style to the new game.

» Jankenteam designer, José Sanz is hard at work on *Alex Kidd In Miracle World DX*. You can see his efforts in 2021.

» [Master System] Shooting projectiles is hugely useful, so the Power Bracelet is a good item to find.

» [Master System] The frog-like Merman launches an arc of bubbles upwards, so it's safest to approach from below.

» [Master System] The motorbike initially seems quite overpowered, but its speed can be a liability in later levels.



» [Master System] Your skills in navigating stages and finding secrets are frequently rewarded, with extra money and items.

▶ people who continue to mistakenly call the character 'Alex The Kid' to this day. Later to join the project was artist Rieko Kodama (credited as 'Rie Wakashimizu'). "At that time, *Dragon Ball* was extremely popular and I can understand Hayashida-san wanted to make a game of it," she says. However, her own involvement began when the project was already well underway. "As I remember, I was not involved in the planning stage. When I joined the project, the character Alex Kidd was already set."

How much did Kodama know about the intent behind the design of Alex Kidd as a character? "I was not responsible for character design so I cannot say for sure," she responds. "I think the initiative was to make him more comical, and [they] designed him with an animation hero-like image – and, just like many fans say, Son-Goku of *Journey To The West*." says Kodama of her colleague's work. *Journey To The West* was also the basis for *Dragon Ball*, so it's no surprise to see the classic Chinese novel referenced here, too. Héctor Toro, the art director at Jankenteam – a team of *Alex Kidd* fans who are developing the official remake, *Alex Kidd In Miracle World DX* – recalls his initial reaction to the game's hero: "When I was a kid, I was not aware of the physical characteristics of the character, I just saw a child punching. It didn't even surprise me that his fist [was] the same size as his head... but today I see him as a character with courage, a sense of justice and peace."

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

PIT POT
SYSTEM: MASTER SYSTEM
YEAR: 1985

PHANTASY STAR (PICTURED)
SYSTEM: MASTER SYSTEM
YEAR: 1987

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG
SYSTEM: MEGA DRIVE
YEAR: 1991

Considering those influences, Alex Kidd was in many ways an archetypal hero, with his red jumpsuit, slightly monkey-like features and big appetite. However, when seen snacking on his favourite food between stages, Alex was eating something that would prove unfamiliar to western audiences – onigiri, aptly named 'rice balls' in the western manuals. "The reason why Alex likes onigiri could be simply because onigiri is one typical food in Japan," says Kodama. "At the time the game was made, we did not think that *Alex Kidd* would be released in the west. Therefore, we simply put Japanese traditional ideas like onigiri and janken. I am very surprised that in present day fans are still enjoying Alex Kidd and show their love [for] watching him eating his onigiri."

Kodama was still very new to Sega, in only her second year with the company, but she was given major responsibility for *Alex Kidd In Miracle World*. "I felt happy to be given full responsibility for the title screen and backgrounds," she explains. The background graphics that she drew were based on a range of environments that the planner had specified. "In [the] planning stage, Hayashida-san wanted Alex to have his adventure in various places," the artist recalls. "In terms of background design, maps were made with stacking tons of blocks. Backgrounds were drawn without mapping. I started with drawing blocks, changing their colours trying to show animated movement. Lava and underwater were some examples."

From a home console perspective, *Alex Kidd In Miracle World* was a state-of-the-art project. The Mark III hardware had only been introduced in October 1985 and still had the best graphical capabilities of any console on the market. But despite being so new to the company, Kodama had enjoyed the benefit of using arcade hardware for the previous project she had worked on, *Quartet*. Coming from hardware that would provide the basis for the Mega Drive, Kodama couldn't help but see Sega's 8-bit console as a step down. "In that time arcade motherboards would go first, and household consoles always had to try to catch up," she says of the difference. "Mark III did not have multiple scrolling background nor good colour capability." Still, working with the comparatively limited platform was a challenge that she relished. "We tried to fully utilise the features of Mark III/Master System. It was fun trying to push the limits of the hardware."

The project wasn't just special because of the hardware it was running on, as the game had also been afforded a 128KB cartridge. This was a big deal – *Alex Kidd* would be only the sixth Sega console game to have such a large cartridge, which was four times what developers had previously been given to work with, even for high-profile arcade conversions like *Hang-On*. Still, Kodama felt that economical usage of that space was still a wise choice, as evidenced by her approach to the game's title screen. "I tried to show Alex's adventure like a comic book. By doing so I could use the same graphics as in the game without using extra memory," she recalls. "This is something we do not take into consideration these days. In the past, we always tired to save a bit of memory here and there, and consume them at the climax."

As well as giving Alex a wide range of environments to traverse, the use of the 128KB cartridge ensured that he would have a good variety of enemies to encounter. Most of them are drawn from the world of nature, as he'll fight plenty of frogs, fish, scorpions and other creatures of the wild, but there are some more creative additions, too. The bubble-blowing Merman ▶

RADAXIAN HIGH STREET

ALEX KIDD RELIES ON PLENTY OF ITEMS DURING HIS QUEST TO DEFEAT JANKEN THE GREAT – SOME OF WHICH HE CAN FIND IN THE WORLD, WHILE OTHERS ARE AVAILABLE IN SHOPS. HERE'S THE COMPLETE CATALOGUE

REGULAR ITEMS

ONIGIRI

Alex's favourite food appears at the end of each stage and must be collected in order to finish. In some versions it's a hamburger.

POWER BRACELET

Once activated, this bracelet allows Alex to fire off projectiles for the remainder of the stage, unless he loses a life or stumbles into water.

EXTRA LIFE

This one is pretty self-explanatory. It can be found in the wild and is the most expensive item in the game's shops, selling for 500.

CANE OF FLIGHT

This shop-only item costs 120, and enables Alex to fly for a short period. Watch out, as there's no warning when the effect ends.

TELEPORTATION POWDER

This useful item costs 100 and allows Alex to pass through enemies without harm for a short period. It doesn't work on spikes or pits.

TELEPATHY BALL

This rare item lets Alex see what his opponent is planning in janken battles. It's only found in Mount Kave and the Radaxian Castle.

MAGIC CAPSULE A

This capsule spawns eight miniature Alex Kidds, which run forward and attack enemies. For 100, it's a good way to beat tough foes.

MAGIC CAPSULE B

For 120, this capsule will shield you against enemy attacks for a limited time, but Alex can't perform any attacks while it's active.

SUKOPAKO MOTORCYCLE

This speedy vehicle costs 200, and ploughs through enemies and rocks alike. You have to use it in the stage you buy it, and it doesn't reverse!

PETICOPTER

For 200, Alex can fly through the air by hitting the jump button repeatedly. He can also fire missiles to take out pesky enemies.

TREASURES

SUN STONE MEDALLION

One of the two items Alex needs to access the final stage and one he cannot miss – it's given to him before the game and can't be lost.

MOONLIGHT STONE MEDALLION

The other item Alex needs to unlock the final room is gained after defeating Janken. Even if you deliberately avoid picking it up.

SIGNED LETTER

This letter is found in the Radaxian Castle. High Stone Of Nibana will only hand over the Hirotta Stone if you have this in your possession.

HIROTTA STONE

A stone tablet used to reveal the game's final treasure. The mysterious symbols must be read from top to bottom, right to left.

GOLD CROWN

Janken has turned the citizens of Radaxian to stone, and this magical treasure can reverse that. Obtaining it is Alex's ultimate goal.

MIRACLE WORLD TOUR

ALEX WILL HAVE TO TRAVEL ACROSS LAND, SEA AND AIR TO SAVE HIS FAMILY AND THE PEOPLE OF RADAXIAN – HERE'S A LOOK AT THE LOCATIONS IN MORE DETAIL

MOUNT ETERNAL

1 Descending from his secluded training grounds, Alex must watch out for monster birds and the occasional ghost. Once you reach the bottom of the mountain, a river full of poisonous fish awaits.

MOUNT KAVE

7 Bats, ghosts, rolling rocks and lava are tough obstacles for Alex to pass, and Scissors Head awaits if he can. Thankfully, the telepathy ball found here will help to defeat Janken's second henchman.

THE PATH TO NIBANA

13 The game's only stage that scrolls to the left is also Alex's final Peticopter challenge. Losing the vehicle here is effectively a lost life, as it's impossible to clear much of the level without it.

THE ROAD TO LAKE FATHOM

2 Monster frogs, scorpions and mountainous block formations threaten to impede your way, but they're little trouble if you have a motorbike. Stone Head makes his first appearance at the end of this stage.

THE BLAK WOODS

8 You can buy a motorbike here, but you might want to think twice about it – the spike traps make it a risky proposition. Monkeys are annoying enemies, and the sword-wielding bear is a tricky fight, too.

THE KINGDOM OF NIBANA

14 If you picked up the letter to High Stone in the Radaxian Castle, he'll provide you with a tablet inscribed with mysterious symbols. That may come in handy later, and it's the only thing to see here.

LAKE FATHOM

3 Alex can swim across this lake, but that's the easy route. If he chooses to fight the first octopus, he can travel through the secret passage it guards to reach an island full of cash and a bonus life.

BINGOO RIVER

9 Alex gets a boat to start this stage, but one crash will see him swimming through treacherous waters. It's tricky to keep the boat intact, but the extra cash on offer makes it very worthwhile.

JOURNEY TO JANKEN'S FORTRESS

15 The last chance for Alex to ride a motorbike, this stage is something of a breather before the tough closing stretch if you can keep it. Your final encounter with Paper Head takes place here, too.

THE ISLAND OF SAINT NURARI

4 High walls and deadly pits of lava are the hazards that Alex must brave to reach his spiritual father, Saint Nurari. This is where Alex learns his own history, and gains the Peticopter for the next stage.

BINGOO LOWLAND

10 Swampy marshes and ever-present lightning clouds make this area difficult on foot. A Peticopter is highly recommended. Janken's henchman Paper Head awaits at the end of this stage.

JANKEN'S FORTRESS

16 Like any villain worth his salt, Janken has created a lair filled with fiendish traps including poisoned gas and trap doors. Find him, beat him at his own game, punch him and rescue Princess Lora.

CROSSING TO NAMUI

5 The sky above the water is full of riches, but one wrong move will send Alex plummeting into the less-rewarding sea below. No matter where you finish the level, your next destination will be the same.

THE RADAXIAN CASTLE

11 Alex's brother Egle is being held captive in this fortress. Free him, then fight your way through to a second encounter with Stone Head, who will no longer accept defeat graciously.

CRAGG LAKE

17 Deep below the lake, a secret chamber hides the ultimate prize, the crown that will restore Radaxian's citizens – but beware, as a ghostly danger awaits those who don't know how to reveal it.

THE VILLAGE OF NAMUI

6 Alex encounters invincible fire enemies for the first time here, but a Peticopter will help if he can afford it. Once you defeat the rampaging bull, a villager will let Alex know where his brother is held.

THE CITY OF RADAXIAN

12 Small statues are found all over Alex's home town, which starts a trend of very short stages. This one features a small amount of platforming, a shop and your second encounter with Scissors Head.

encountered in the underwater stages is a highlight, both for its visual design and its attack pattern, while the Hopper stands out more for its oddness – though again, this is only to western audiences, as Japanese players would be familiar with the Daruma, a traditional Japanese doll that appears in many children's games. "The Daruma was an 'angry tomato' to me," notes Héctor. "The enemy of 'Death' to me was a kind of sea seal,"

The game's soundtrack was composed by Tokuhiko Uwabo, whose previous works had included the Japan-only game *Satellite 7* and the Master System versions of *Choplifter* and *Fantasy Zone*. He chose to create musical themes based on the action Alex was currently performing, and plenty of them are memorable – most notably the underwater and motorbike themes. However, the cheery main overworld theme, which also provides the basis for the title screen, level start and ending themes, is the one that has become most associated with *Alex Kidd*. As well as appearing in *Alex Kidd In The Enchanted Castle*, the theme follows him into his later appearances in games such as *Segagaga* and *Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed*.

Of course, the game design bringing all of these elements together is key, and on a superficial level it is much like *Super Mario Bros* – Alex runs and jumps through the environment, battling enemies and smashing blocks to get through each stage. Rather than jumping up to hit blocks from below, Alex uses a more conventional forward punch – and the blocks that he encounters are far easier to read. Star blocks will always contain money, skull blocks temporarily stun Alex, and question mark blocks broadly contain useful items but may contain a deadly ghost. The enemies, it must be said, are a little less sophisticated than those found in *Super Mario Bros* – while their behaviours are certainly solid, most of them have very fixed patterns of movement. Only the ghost and monkey base their attacks on Alex's position, and there's no secondary behaviours to note, like the clever way that Koopa shells are used.

What really sets *Alex Kidd In Miracle World* apart from its contemporaries is the ambition of the development team, which provided the game with enough depth to ensure that it remained relevant well beyond its initial release. "I begun playing videogames in 1991," says Ramón Nafria, producer at Jankenteam. "Sonic was able to roll. Mario was able to convert into Super Mario and throw fireballs. Alex Kidd was able to shoot 'kames', ride a bike, a Peticopter, a boat, fly, and read the mind of the enemies," he explains in reference to *Alex Kidd*'s versatility. "I think it is quite a technical feat for that time," says José Sanz, game designer at Jankenteam. "Even today, as I investigate how the original team did [it] to apply it in the remake, I am very amazed at everything they did. Original battles against the bosses, the initial vertical phase, the vehicles, the shops and monetary system, the camera and style of 'dungeons' in castles."

Indeed, collecting sacks of cash feels much less like collecting arbitrary tokens than it does in many other platform games, thanks to the inclusion of shops and a permanent inventory. Beyond that, the vehicles add some real variety to the gameplay that was hard to come by in 1986. "Again, this is an idea from Hayashida-san," says Kodama. "'Hero crashes into bad guys on a motocycle!' is something we saw from superhero shows. It is easy to imagine Alex Kidd has different rides like a hero. Other than that, inspiration could have come from gadget cars in *Bond* movies, or futuristic items in *Doraemon*." Transitions feel natural, too – if you lose your vehicle over the water, you can still swim to the end of a stage.

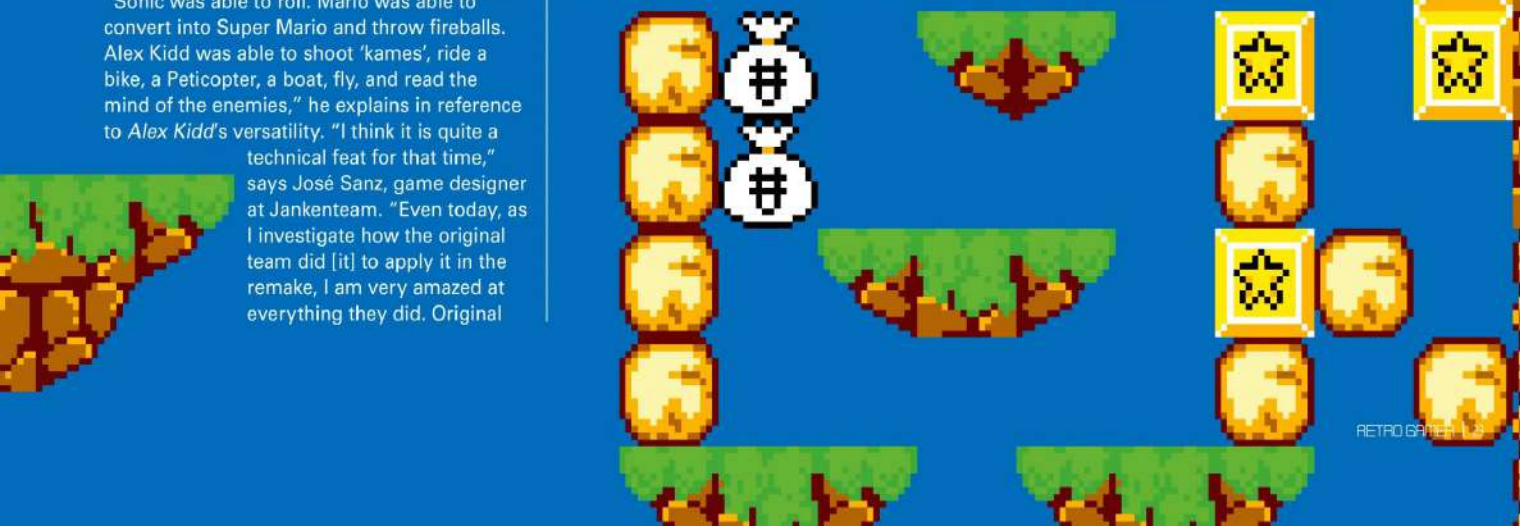
Additionally, the incorporation of adventure elements help to distinguish the game. The way the map screen shows your progress through Miracle World is quite novel amongst console platformers of the time, as is the fact that the game doesn't end with the defeat of the final boss, but the retrieval of the final quest item. The use of a small cast of characters with a significant amount of dialogue clues players into the existence of the secondary objectives that, while not strictly necessary, do help you to complete the game – if you don't rescue Egle, you won't get the letter to High Stone, who subsequently won't give you the stone tablet containing the correct sequence of moves required to beat the final stage. Having said that, ambitious experimentation can lead to some failures, and the final stage is arguably one of them. There can't have been many players outside Japan who would have guessed that the symbols on that stone tablet, much like vertically written Japanese text, were intended to be read from in columns from right-to-left.

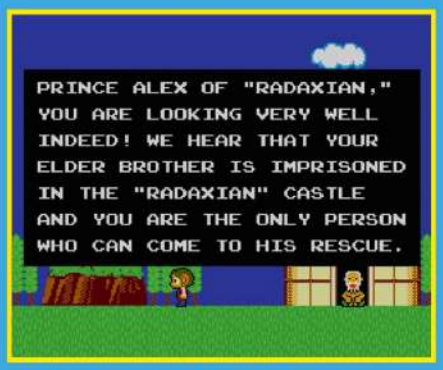
Speaking of wayward experiments, one of the most commonly criticised aspects of the game is one of its most distinctive features – the use of rock paper scissors as a boss battle mechanic. It's difficult to imagine the game without it, as the team leaned into the theme heavily. The main villain, Janken The Great, takes his name from the Japanese name for the game, and his three henchmen have heads resembling the game's three hand symbols – an idea that Kodama credits to Hayashida. "The

» [Master System] The game has no time limit, which is welcome in tricky jumping sections like this.

» [Master System] A dip in the deep often serves as an alternative way to clear vehicle-based levels.

» [Master System] Items from boxes disappear after a short while, so you'll need to grab extra lives quickly when they appear.




PRINCE ALEX OF "RADAXIAN,"
YOU ARE LOOKING VERY WELL
INDEED! WE HEAR THAT YOUR
ELDER BROTHER IS IMPRISONED
IN THE "RADAXIAN" CASTLE
AND YOU ARE THE ONLY PERSON
WHO CAN COME TO HIS RESCUE.

[Master System] Though the 'wall of text' execution may be clumsy, the occasional bits of dialogue do add a lot to the experience.

[Master System] Ghosts are quite annoying – they can't be killed and will chase you until they're out of view.

style of 'boss with three henchmen' probably came from the animations like *Time Bokan* and *Yatterman* of Tatsunoko Production," she explains. "In many of these anime, there were always three somehow boneheaded henchmen under the boss. This is the stereotype animation we saw when we were children. It is hard to hate them even as enemies." However, while the character designs it inspired were memorable, Hayashida has expressed regret over the mechanic in retrospective interviews, saying that it "wasn't a great fit for an action game" due to the reliance on memorisation over practised skills.

Alex Kidd In Miracle World was released in Japan in November 1986, with a North American release following soon after. In the US, the *Computer Entertainer* newsletter gave the game 3.5/4 for both graphics and gameplay, and stated that the game was "one of those delightful games with lots of surprises and things to discover". Writing in *Video Games & Computer Entertainment*, reviewer Clayton Walnum noted the game's similarity to *Super Mario Bros* but remarked that it was "far from a clone" and "about as addicting as games come", praising its graphics, sound effects and challenge. As with many early Master System games, only retrospective reviews are available from UK publications. *The Complete Guide To Consoles* from *CVG* scored the game 87% in 1989, singing the praises of its "great graphics and sound, and, most importantly, thoroughly absorbing gameplay". In 1991, *Sega Pro*'s very first issue gave *Alex Kidd In Miracle World* a score of 95% on the basis that it offered "so much to do and so many different ways of doing it".

The game undoubtedly received a major boost from Sega's decision to build the game into Master System consoles.

"*Alex Kidd*, like many other people, was the first videogame I played," says Héctor. "It was probably because it came preinstalled in the memory of the Sega Master System II, but the infinite hours I spent with my brother made me remember this game with special affection." PAL Master System consoles had featured the game since late 1988, though it was one of a few options at that time – Master System Plus buyers would get *Hang-On* and *Safari Hunt*, and Super System bundles included *Missile Defense 3-D*. When the Master System II came along, *Alex Kidd* became the game of choice worldwide. All North American versions of the console include the game, but European models replaced *Alex Kidd* with *Sonic The Hedgehog* from late 1992. The built-in version made some minor changes, reversing the jump and punch buttons to the more conventional layout, and replacing Alex's treasured onigiri with hamburgers for the western audience.

The development team went on to achieve further success together. "After *Alex Kidd*, I was involved in background design of *Phantasy Star* and *Sonic*. Those backgrounds were made

GOKU WHO?

IT'S FAIR TO SAY THAT SOME VESTIGES OF THE PLAN TO CREATE A DRAGON BALL GAME REMAIN IN ALEX KIDD IN MIRACLE WORLD – JUST TAKE A LOOK AT THESE COMPARISONS

TELEPATHY BALL

In the *Dragon Ball* series, the titular items enable those who possess them to make wishes. The orange balls come in sets of seven, each bearing up to seven red stars. The telepathy ball in *Alex Kidd In Miracle World* is visually similar, being blue rather than orange, and grants Alex the ability to see his opponent's janken moves.

BEAR THIEF

In the third episode of *Dragon Ball*, Goku faces off against a large bear armed with a massive sword. The major enemy at the end of the Blakwood in *Alex Kidd In Miracle World* is very similarly designed, with enough changes to its colour and costume to be distinct, while still bearing obvious signs of its inspiration.

JANKEN

As well as being a popular game in Japan, janken – or rock paper scissors – is the basis of one of Goku's signature attacks, though they're more directly applied. For example, scissors becomes a poke in the eyes. *Alex Kidd*'s use of the game is more conventional, with no contact made between players.

JANKEN THE GREAT

Speaking of janken, this one's a little loose but it seems the game's villain evolved from the *Dragon Ball* baddie Emperor Pilaf. Janken is taller but his silhouette is pretty similar, with those pointy ears and angled eyes. His clothing isn't identical, but you can definitely note the resemblance in his hat and the circular motif on his top.

BIG EATER

Both Goku and Alex have major appetites, and don't mind the odd onigiri. Goku's diet is a bit more diverse, but to be fair he wasn't limited to 128KB of ROM space. Other tales use this trope, too – the Japanese manga and anime series *Saiyuki*, also inspired by *Journey To The West*, also depicts Son Goku as a voracious eater.

DRAGON BALL IMAGES COPYRIGHT © TOEI ANIMATION

from the skills I learned from *Alex Kidd*," says Kodama. Hayashida and Uwabo joined her on the *Phantasy Star* team, and created a classic RPG that stands as another of the Master System's finest games. Also members of that team were Yuji Naka and Naoto Ohshima, whom Kodama worked with on *Sonic The Hedgehog* – the character that would ultimately usurp Alex Kidd's position as Sega's mascot.

Unfortunately for Alex Kidd, while Sega promoted him as its star through the late Eighties, he never quite delivered as hoped. In part, that must be due to the inconsistency of his games. *Alex Kidd: The Lost Stars* was a passable arcade platformer that lacked a lot of *Miracle World*'s notable features, and was only mildly well-received on the Master System. *Alex Kidd In High-Tech World* was a rebranded version of the anime tie-in *Anmitsu Hime*, a mediocre and obtuse action adventure game, while the top-down racer *Alex Kidd: BMX Trial* never made it out of Japan. The Mega Drive launch game *Alex Kidd In The Enchanted Castle* was the closest we ever got to a true *Miracle World* sequel, but its simplified nature, loose controls and increased use of rock paper scissors battles meant that it wasn't as well received. Only *Alex Kidd In Shinobi World*, a parody crossover with Sega's famous ninja series, really hit the heights of the original game. For 30 years it seemed that *Alex Kidd* would be consigned to the history books, until the recent surprise announcement of the remake project *Alex Kidd In Miracle World DX*, developed by Jankenteam and published by Merge Games.

While fans have brought *Alex Kidd* back to the market, it's only right that Rieko Kodama should have the final word – one that she would never imagine having back in 1986. "I felt it was a well-balanced package among game design, graphics and sound. However, I could not imagine it would go so deep into fans' memories," she says. It seems like she's feeling the same excitement for the remake as the rest of us, too. "I am honoured to see the fans' reactions. I heard that the members of the development team of *Miracle World DX* are also all-time fans of *Alex Kidd*. Their love moved them to present this remake to us in Sega. Although development just started, I am sure they will do their best with love. I wish all fans who want to go adventure with Alex Kidd can feel their spirit, and I am looking forward to see Alex making his new steps."

But with *Alex Kidd In Miracle World DX* not due for release until 2021, there's plenty of time for you to reacquaint yourself with the original, and appreciate it for what it is – a platform game that showcased just how high Sega's developers could aim, regardless of the later misfortunes of its star character. ★

» [Master System] The janken battles are a memorable part of *Miracle World*, but Kotaro Hayashida retrospectively feels they slow the game down now.

» [Master System] Animal sub-boss fights are pretty simple, and even easier with the Magic Capsule A.

CONVERSION CAPERS

FOR ALL ITS POPULARITY, ALEX KIDD IN MIRACLE WORLD HAS SELDOM BEEN PORTED, BUT ITS MORE RECENT RELEASES ARE WORTH CHECKING OUT

Though Sega was one of the earliest publishers to realise the potential of its back catalogue, and has put out a variety of retro releases and compilations over the years, *Alex Kidd In Miracle World* is a game that is frequently overlooked. A version was announced for PlayStation 2 as part of the Japanese *Sega Ages 2500* range, but ultimately never saw release. As a result, it took over 20 years for any other platform to receive the game, with the wait finally ended by a Wii Virtual Console release in 2008. In 2012, *Sega Vintage Collection: Alex Kidd & Co* brought the game to Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3, in a package with *Super Hang-On* and *The Revenge Of Shinobi*. This version allowed you to choose your regional variation and offered a wealth of display options, as well as support for achievements and trophies.

The definitive version of *Alex Kidd In Miracle World* is the *Sega Ages* version developed by M2, released for Nintendo Switch in 2019. This version features a soundtrack that uses the Mark III's optional FM sound module, which had yet to be released when *Alex Kidd In Miracle World* was developed, and adds extra plot-related visuals between stages. The game also features online rankings, time attack and a rewind feature to alleviate some of the game's challenge. Additionally, it allows you to choose your preferred regional release, and features the usual *Sega Ages* variety of display filters.

[PC] In the top-right corner, you can see a quick item menu that should make equipping the Power Bracelet a bit smoother.

[PC] Classic Mode uses the full screen, enabling you to see further ahead than before.

ALEX KIDD IN MIRACLE WORLD DX

» [PC] It looks like some stages will take place at different times of day, which should add visual variety.

» [PC] Changes are visible from the very first screen – check out the extra NPC.

After 30 years on the sidelines, Alex Kidd is back in a starring role with a remake of his first adventure. We speak to the developers at Jankenteam to find out more about how the project is coming together

In recent years, Sega's classic properties have been given a new lease of life due to the publisher's new policy of giving skilled fans the reins to its classic properties, even going so far as to licence some of them to other publishers. *Sonic Mania* was a shot in the arm for the wayward series, while the likes of *Wonder Boy* and *Streets Of Rage* are more relevant now than they have been in decades thanks to projects that capture the spirit and quality of the originals. The latest team to take on this challenge is Jankenteam, a group of *Alex Kidd* fans from Spain who are developing *Alex Kidd In Miracle World DX* to be published by Merge Games.

The project has its origins in an unofficial effort to remake the game, started by art director Héctor Toro and game designer José Sanz. "We fantasised about making a new version of *Alex Kidd*," Héctor tells us. "Two days later, I sent [José] sprites of the character for fun and he programmed the movements in Game Maker. In the next week, and without realising, we were doing a whole remake." The project was well-received on social media, and started on the path to becoming officially licensed when the duo got on-board with producer Ramón Nafria, who had long wanted to work with the character. "I had another company (A Crowd of Monsters, now in administration)," Ramón tells us. "In 2014, I approached Sega with the intention of licensing *Alex Kidd*, and with the help of José, Héctor, Bibiki [José Ramón Garcia] and Merge Games, we were able to finally do it."

JOSÉ RAMON GARCIA
» Musician

RAMON NAFRIA
» Producer

As you'd expect, the game will be getting a major graphical overhaul, with Héctor employing a cartoonish style, using pixel art of a higher resolution than the original game. "Above all, I wanted to keep the essence of the original game," says Héctor. "Dotemu with Lizardcube are doing a great and excellent job with the return of *Streets Of Rage* and *Wonder Boy*, but they have Ben Fiquet who has an amazing talent and a wonderful pencil stroke. I don't want anyone to compare me to him, or compare me to his projects, or think I'm trying to copy his styles," he continues. "That's why I think that mixing pixel art with a cartoon style and keeping the basic principles of cartoon animation would bring a fresh air to pixel art and create a mark that would differentiate us from other remake or revival projects."

Music is also being reimagined, by José Ramón 'Bibiki' Garcia. "*Alex Kidd*'s melodies are part of many people's childhoods," he tells us. "Due to this, the new tracks are inspired directly by the original soundtrack style. In terms of melodies, construction and harmonic progressions, plus other music styles and genres, [we're] creating a unique aesthetic that (I hope) fits with the new remastered style while keeping the retro feeling." But while the graphics hark back to simpler times, you shouldn't be expecting to hear any chiptunes. "Even though it is important to keep the original feeling, instrumentation has changed completely. Since we are not using Eighties chips anymore, a new audio identity is required, so get ready to be surprised!"

However, the most intriguing news is that the gameplay will be given something of an overhaul, with the promise of improved combat, alternative boss fights and even brand-new stages. "There are levels that lack length or playable details," says José Sanz. "The idea is to improve and expand all those sections of the game in which a revision is needed." Héctor elaborates on this a little further: "I think it was important to explain the story a little more deeply. For example, how does Alex get into Janken The Great's castle? Wouldn't it be logical that there would be a level before entering the castle, where Janken's soldiers would be defending the castle walls? That kind of thing and many others are the questions we ask ourselves when making the game." As for the boss fights, José sees them as an elaboration on the originals. "In the original game, besides the janken fights, the bosses also had a little action phase," he explains. "The idea is to respect the janken, since it is a strange but beloved mechanic, but to improve those action phases with the bosses, making them more thematic and fun."

Jankenteam and Merge Games are working together with Sega to ensure that the game keeps the spirit of the series. "There is a team inside Sega related to these things, and we receive feedback from people that were part of the development team," says Ramón Nafria, Jankenteam's producer. "We really love to see things like that happen, because one of my dreams when I approached Sega for the first time was exactly this, to be able to work with some of their legendary developers." Still, if this all sounds like a bit too much change, there will be a 'Classic Mode' available to play the original game, with full widescreen presentation."

Alex Kidd In Miracle World DX is scheduled for release in 2021, across PC and consoles. That's a long time away, so we had one final question that couldn't wait until later – will Alex eat onigiri or burgers in this version? "We are Spanish. No burgers or onigiris," jokes Héctor. "Paella Valenciana or Spanish omelette!" ✱

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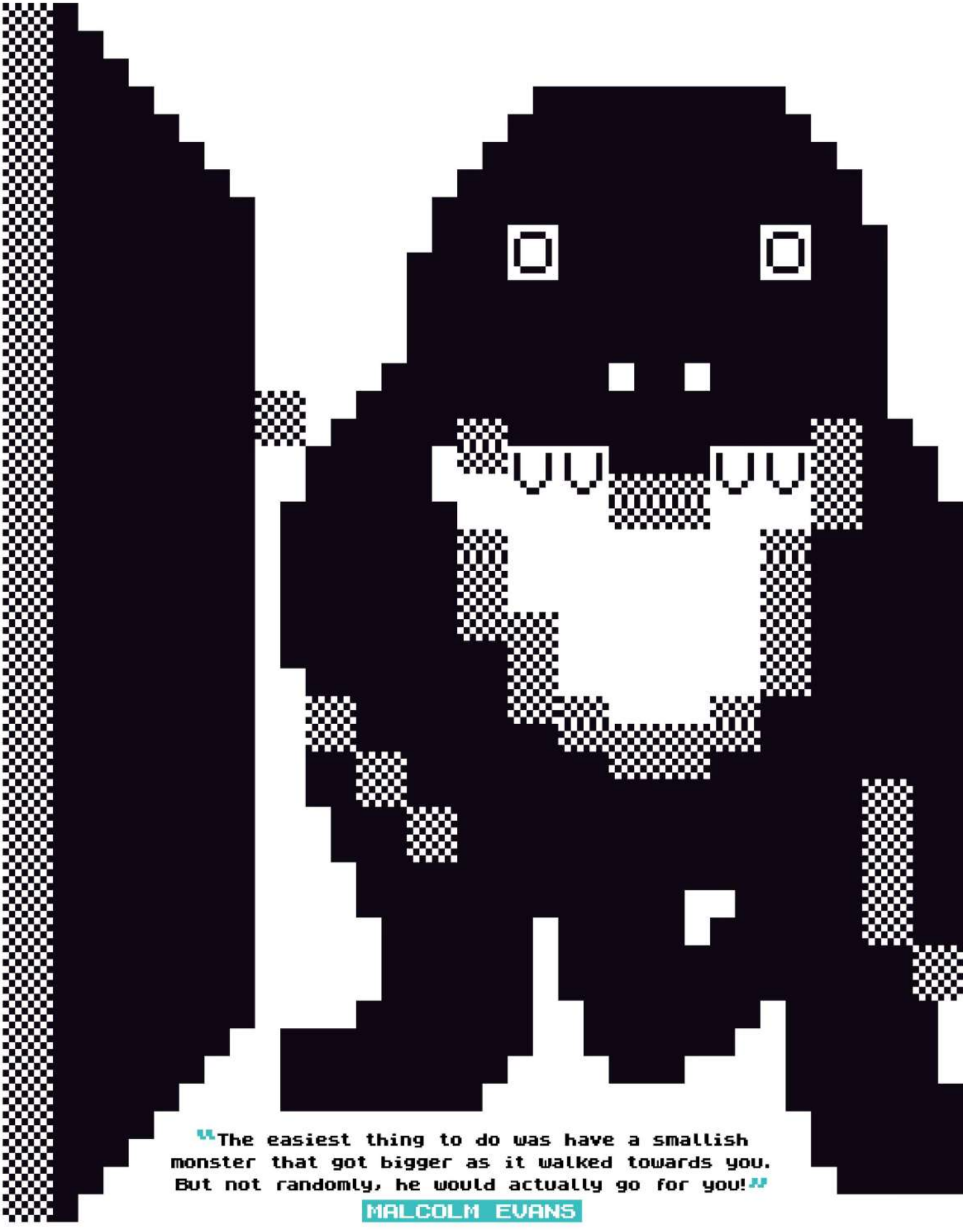


"The easiest thing to do was have a smallish monster that got bigger as it walked towards you. But not randomly, he would actually go for you!"

MALCOLM EVANS

THE EVOLUTION OF 3D MONSTER MAZE

When Malcolm Evans got a ZX81 for his birthday he created a killer app for it – 3D Monster Maze, followed by four 3D sequels. Malcolm remembers how high anxiety and immersive gameplay defined his first-person perspective series

WORDS BY RORY MILNE

Programming is a young man's game. At least that was what thirty-something microprocessor scientist Malcolm Evans was advised when he looked into changing disciplines. Malcolm chose to ignore this guidance, however, and in 1981 – after unwrapping a birthday present from his wife – he took matters into his own hands, as the pioneering developer explains. "I was in the aerospace industry doing hardware, and I was keen to get into doing software, but it was difficult," Malcolm sighs. "So what happened was that my wife bought me a ZX81, and I thought: 'Now what the hell can I do with this?' So I wrote an algorithm that created a random maze. I did that in 2D, but then I wondered: 'What would it look like if you walked around it?'"

Malcolm's solution for rendering first-person perspective tours exploited the ZX81's ability to rapidly switch between full-screen graphics. He used these as frames of animation depicting 3D sections of his maze, which subsequently became home to a monster. "You could build up frames and then switch them, so I was doing that," Malcolm notes, "and then I was talking to a friend who said: 'Why don't you put something into the maze and make it a game?' So I thought: 'How do I get a monster in there, and how on Earth do I animate it?' I decided that the easiest thing to do was have a smallish monster that got bigger as it walked towards you. But not randomly, he would actually go for you!"

After leaving the games industry, Malcolm Evans wrote software for spacecraft and a scientific satellite.

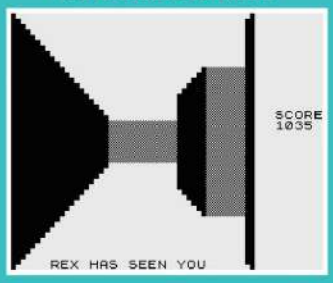
Having given Rex – his monster – homing instincts, Malcolm evened the odds with a chilling text-message system to warn players of the T-rex's proximity to them. "I didn't think about using visual indicators to show how close the dinosaur was," Malcolm reasons, "because ideally I wanted sounds in there, but the sound on the ZX81 was just clicks and bangs, so I thought about just telling you where Rex was. You wouldn't necessarily see him coming at you, but you always turned and ran! It was just to build up the anxiety, and you didn't necessarily have to see him to do that."

By way of rewarding players who held their nerve, Malcolm devised a scoring system with points being awarded for each step taken before becoming Rex's lunch. "I suppose the thing was that each maze was completely different – so where you started, and where the exit was," Malcolm ponders. "Obviously, some would have been easier than others, but each one was slightly more difficult, and I just wanted somehow to ▶

STAGES OF EVOLUTION:

THE GREAT ESCAPE

How fleeing mazes and tunnel runs led to chaotic corridors

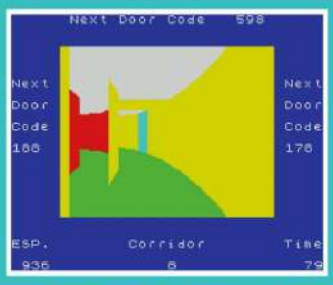


3D MONSTER MAZE

As terrifying as the velociraptors in the *Jurassic Park* kitchen sequence, *3D Monster Maze* drops you in a series of mazes with a hungry T-rex and challenges you to find their exits before you end up as a meal. Worse still, the mazes are randomly generated, so you can't even memorise any escape routes.

3D TUNNEL

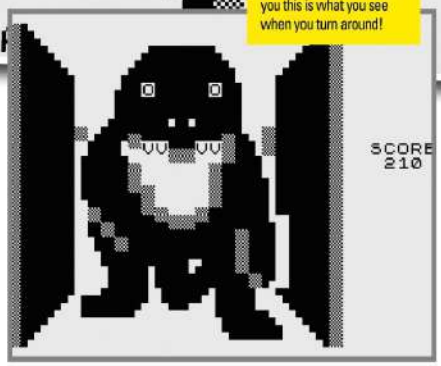
The titular 3D Tunnel is long with endless twists and turns, but it does ultimately reach an end – where you can escape to freedom – rather than looping around to the beginning. The tunnel's creatures are benign, but colliding with its walls costs you a life, so avoiding them is a priority.



CORRIDORS OF GENON

Like *3D Monster Maze*, *Corridors Of Genon* has a maze that's home to hostile opposition that you have to escape. Its labyrinth is made of concentric circular corridors, each with doors that have security code entry systems that you use ESP to open, and Boguls, which drain your psychic powers.

» [ZX81] A foreboding atmosphere is created from the moment you step into *3D Monster Maze*'s shadowy labyrinth.

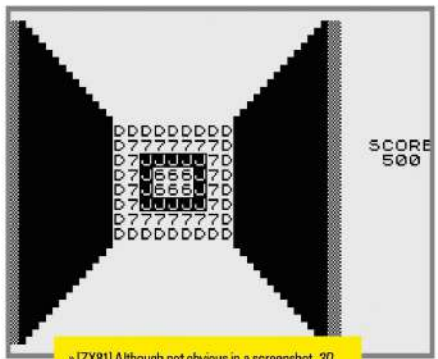


» [ZX81] When *3D Monster Maze*'s dino sneaks up on you this is what you see when you turn around!

give players a sense of achievement, even if they were killed off after 20 steps!"

Having given prospective players of his debut title suitable incentive, Malcolm named his labyrinthine horror game *3D Monster Maze*, and on its release it devoured the competition. "It was only after I produced it that I started looking at what else was available," Malcolm admits. "It was then that I discovered that: 'Oh. They're all in 2D!' So it was a surprise to me that *3D Monster Maze* sold. The other thing that happened was that as it started to take off I was made redundant. The company I was working for – Sperry Gyroscope in Bristol – closed down. So I ended up unemployed at just the right time."

Viewing redundancy as an opportunity, Malcolm convinced WHSmith to buy 10,000 copies of *3D Monster Maze* upfront, after which he devised a WWI follow-up. "My first thought was: 'Wouldn't it be great to do a First World War dogfight!'"

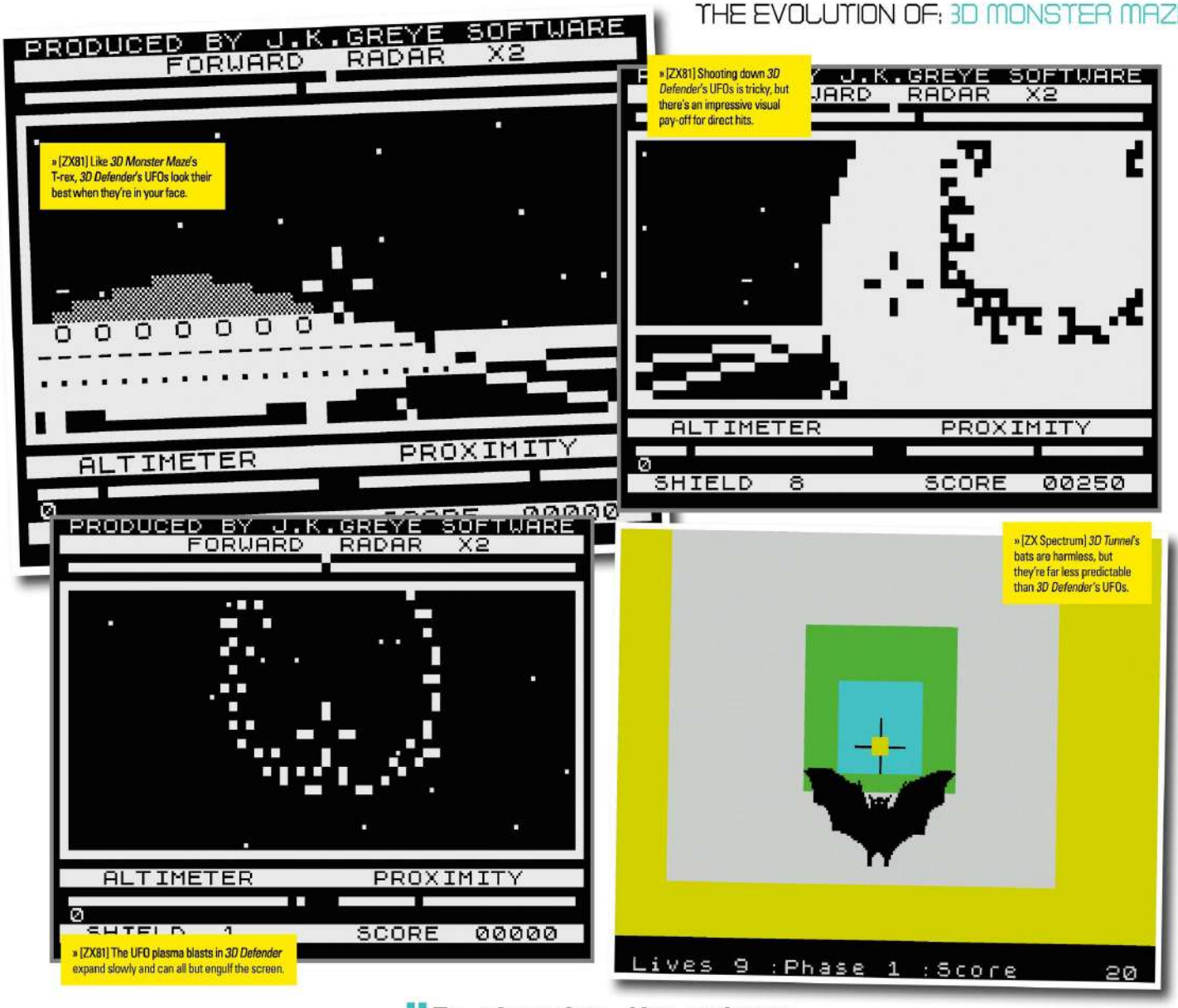


» [ZX81] Although not obvious in a screenshot, *3D Monster Maze*'s exit is a mesmerising kaleidoscope.

Malcolm enthuses. "But it would have ended up being quite slow, and you wouldn't recognise what the aircraft were until they were virtually on top of you, so you couldn't put biplanes in there! One thing I wish I had realised was that the ZX81 character set could have been changed, so increasing the apparent graphics resolution. Then zeppelins could have gracefully slid across the screen with detailed biplanes weaving around in protective roles."

But with his focus on low-res visuals, Malcolm reimagined his WWI dogfight as an invasion of saucer-shaped UFOs that could easily be identified from a distance. "The first thing I did was plot lines on the ground, so that you would get a feeling of height and speed," Malcolm recalls. "Then I simplified the biplanes down to UFOs, which were round, and therefore you recognised that they were UFOs. But then I realised that they were coming towards you and flying off the edge of the screen pretty quickly! It was then that I extended the size of the screen by putting radar on it, so that you could see that off to one side or the other there was a UFO coming."

The radar in Malcolm's shooter was far from traditional, however, which the developer puts down to his game's narrative and its lack of screen



» [ZX81] Like *3D Monster Maze*'s T-rex, *3D Defender*'s UFOs look their best when they're in your face.

» [ZX81] Shooting down *3D Defender*'s UFOs is tricky, but there's an impressive visual pay-off for direct hits.

» [ZX81] The UFO plasma blasts in *3D Defender* expand slowly and can all but engulf the screen.

» [ZX Spectrum] *3D Tunnel*'s bats are harmless, but they're far less predictable than *3D Defender*'s UFOs.

space. "Well I was assuming that these UFOs would be attacking in the future, and not in the present day!" Malcolm laughs. "It was also the fact that the graphic for the radar couldn't be very big, and yet you still had to get all of the information from it that you needed. So I settled on the radar and proximity meters I had because they seemed to be sufficient."

As well as incorporating an atypical radar, Malcolm further increased the difficulty of his second game – now named *3D Defender* – by deducting points for each UFO that wasn't shot down. "While I was testing it, putting in some incentive to do something just came in automatically," Malcolm reflects. "I wanted to build up the anxiety all of the time, just like I did in *3D Monster Maze*. I was more interested in building up the anxiety than some other aspects, perhaps. So you couldn't just sit there in *3D Defender* and have a cup of tea!"

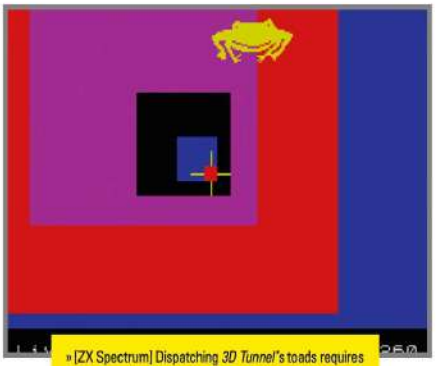
Like *3D Monster Maze* before it, *3D Defender* turned heads on its release, then just months later, Malcolm ordered a ZX Spectrum, and after developing a top-down Spectrum *Monster Maze* he rendered a first-person perspective tunnel on the system. "I thought I'd do something like *3D Monster Maze* for the walls, but this time keep them the same while changing the colours," Malcolm recollects. "By changing the colours, I could create the movement of the tunnel, and as it went up and down you had to avoid the sides. I thought you lost all perspective of sitting on a chair while you were looking at the screen; you were actually in it."

> **"By changing the colours, I could create the movement of the tunnel. I thought you lost all perspective of sitting on a chair"**
>
> **MALCOLM EVANS**

But as immersive as Malcolm's tunnel was, it lacked gameplay, and so the developer added his trademark fear factor by filling it with bats, spiders, toads and rats to shoot down – although he stopped short of adding a T-rex. "I thought of all of the things that you would find in a tunnel, and the fact that they all moved differently, so that you would have to sort out techniques to use with them," Malcolm considers. "There weren't any dinosaurs down there. Of course, what you do find at the end of a tunnel is an underground train coming towards you! I think there was just one safe position between it and the wall, and you would see all of the people in it zooming past."

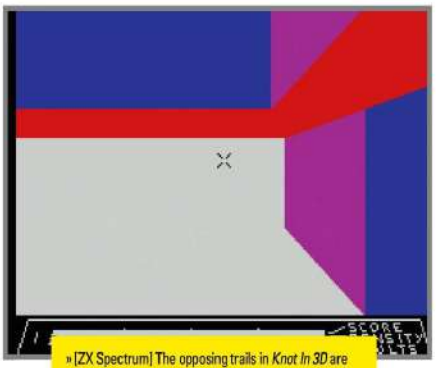
In addition to tapping into animal-based phobias, Malcolm also made collisions with the tunnel walls of his latest project deadly, just to further increase the anxiety of those playing it. "You had to really concentrate all of the time, and if you were concentrating on trying to shoot things then you would go into the wall," Malcolm observes. "So it would entice you to be thinking about two things at the same time, because suddenly the tunnel would zoom left or right, or up or down. It was just to raise the player's anxiety; I would always do that with my fast-moving games."

One final possibility for high anxiety was overlooked by Malcolm as he finalised his tunnel-set shooter, in that *3D Tunnel* – as it was now called – didn't have junctions, although he feels that he could have made them work. "I probably would have tried to get it so that you would see the tunnel dividing into two, and then you would go down one or the other," Malcolm ▶



» [ZX Spectrum] Dispatching *3D Tunnel*'s toads requires you to target the areas where they're going to leap.

» [ZX Spectrum] To avoid *3D Tunnel*'s trains, hide in the narrow spaces between them and the tunnel walls.



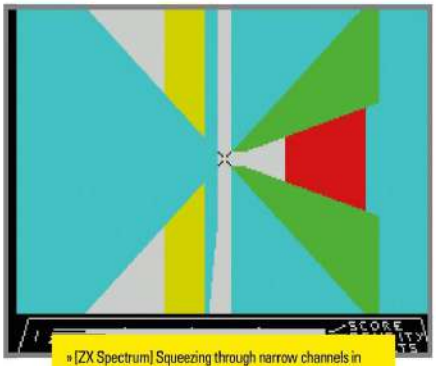
» [ZX Spectrum] The opposing trails in *Knot In 3D* are different colours, but they're all equally obstructive.

speculates. "But you wouldn't have known what was down each one, so then there could have been a sign coming towards you saying: 'Toads this way, bats that way!'"

Of course, *3D Tunnel* didn't need junctions, and its impressive visuals and breakneck speed ensured brisk sales when it came out, but rather than taking a well-earned break, Malcolm sought out inspiration for his next project. "I went around to a friend of mine who had *Snake* on the BBC, and I thought: 'I wonder what it would be like in 3D?'" Malcolm muses. "Then I realised I could do what I did in *3D Tunnel*, and just change the colours to do the whole thing. So you had various colours on each side of the trails, and each trail had three different colours, and as it was all done on colours I could move it as fast as I wanted."

But rather than locking his latest game's play area to the horizontal plane – like *3D Monster Maze*, Malcolm set its vibrant trails in a perpetual forward motion with options to veer left, right, up and down. "The map went to infinity in all directions," Malcolm says of his *Snake*-inspired title, "but if you went out one side you appeared at the other, and if you kept going you would run into yourself. You could watch as a trail was being created in front of you or to one side, and as things got more and more tight you could end up flying down a tunnel. If you could see a gap, and if you timed it right, you could zoom off, although the trails would often increase until you got stuck."

Given that Malcolm's first-person perspective *Snake* got harder as time went on, you might imagine that he would reward players in line with its increasing challenge, but he opted to turn this thinking on its head. "At the beginning, there was nothing in there, so it was a lot easier, and by the time things got tough you had a high score," Malcolm points out, "so I then made it more and more difficult to get points. Then with later



» [ZX Spectrum] Squeezing through narrow channels in *Knot In 3D* feels similar to avoiding trains in *3D Tunnel*.

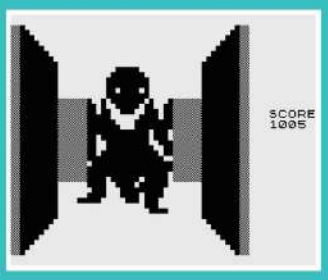
phases you started with more trails, and therefore everything built up far quicker, but you had to carry on getting points, and that would get more and more difficult every phase."

In light of the difficulty of Malcolm's *3D Snake* adaptation – named *Knot In 3D* – a radar like *3D Defender*'s could have been added to the game, although its designer feels that it wouldn't have helped. "The way I wanted *Knot In 3D* to go, I didn't think you would be able to take your eyes of it," Malcolm argues. "Even with a copilot saying: 'Go left!' or 'Go right!' you would have passed the point where you were supposed to turn before you had responded. Also, a radar would have been complicated, and so quite confusing to use."

Magazine reviewers loved *Knot In 3D* when they got their hands on it, but by this point Malcolm had moved on to adapting his ZX81 debut for the Spectrum as *Corridors Of Genon*, with small creatures called Boguls in place of Rex. "*Corridors Of Genon* was me trying to make a Spectrum *3D Monster Maze*," Malcolm acknowledges, "and the size of the Bogul was the biggest you could get. So what I had to do was have some way of them getting you, even though they might be

STAGES OF EVOLUTION:
SCARY MONSTERS

Tackling T-rexes, aliens, creepy crawlies and clones



3D MONSTER MAZE

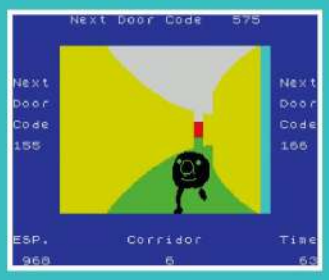
They don't come much scarier than the T-rex; Malcolm's monochrome monster is terrifying. Perhaps not in a still screenshot, but once you're immersed in *3D Monster Maze* and your anxiety is raised sky high by its sinister commentary, then the mere thought of him catching you fills you with fear.

3D DEFENDER

The bug-like UFO pilots that you don't shoot down in *3D Defender* speed past you and attack Earth, which is a scary thought when you consider that you're its last line of defence. By way of further increasing your anxiety, each failure to defend Earth results in you being stripped of points.

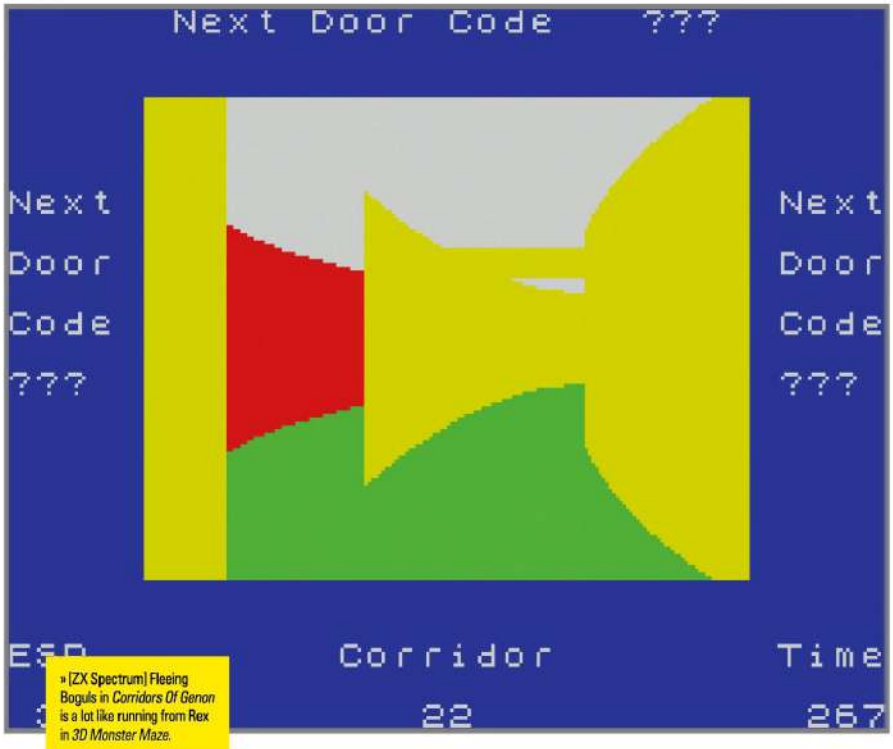
3D TUNNEL

If you've got an animal-based phobia then *3D Tunnel* probably isn't for you, as it likely features your greatest fear. It throws bats, spiders, toads and rats in your direction, each of which gets uncomfortably close to the screen. On the plus side, you're rewarded for blasting them to bits.



CORRIDORS OF GENON

They may not be monsters like Rex, but *Corridors Of Genon*'s Boguls are deeply unnerving. At first glance they look cute, but let's face it, a creature that gives you brain damage by snorting gunge in your face is anything but, so it's no wonder that panic sets in when they're on your trail.



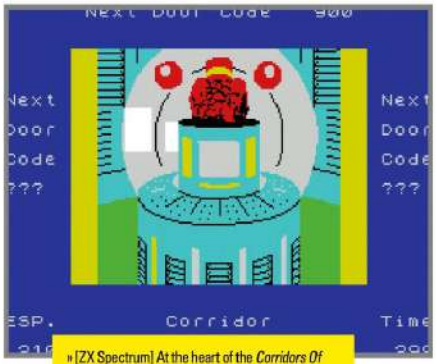
» [ZX Spectrum] Fleeing Boguls in *Corridors Of Genon* is a lot like running from Rex in *3D Monster Maze*.

small. So that's why I thought of the player character getting 'gunged' – or 'Boguled!' The Boguls looked cute because they had a long trumpet-nose, but that's where the gunge came out. That's all they could do – snort gunge all over you!"

> **"The Boguls looked cute because they had a long trumpet-nose, that's where the gunge came out. That's all they could do – snort gunge all over you!"**
>
> **MALCOLM EVANS**

***Corridors Of Genon* also differed from *3D Monster Maze* in that its maze incorporated security code-protected doors instead of open doorways, which your ESP could open, providing attacks by Boguls didn't deplete your sixth sense.** "Each door was like the board game *Mastermind*," Malcolm explains, "and you had the sound of the Bogul coming at you, so you knew if he was at the other side of the door. If you didn't enter the code in a certain time you had to run off somewhere, and you also had the possibility that the Bogul could be in your corridor, so you had to keep worrying about that as well."

By retaining *3D Monster Maze*'s key mechanic of being stalked by an unseen predator, *Corridors Of Genon* replicated its inspiration's edgy atmosphere, although unlike its predecessor it stopped short of rewarding each step taken before death. "I think I probably thought that the anxiety was there already," Malcolm contemplates, "and you would only be able to look at a score when you stopped, because if you took your eye off the game then anything could happen in that time. Also, your best time was something to beat instead of a score."



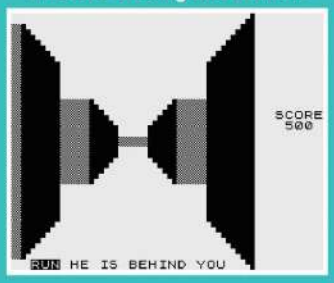
» [ZX Spectrum] At the heart of the *Corridors Of Genon* there's an evil brain that you have to decode.

But in keeping with Malcolm's T-rex-themed debut, *Corridors Of Genon* had a twist; once you escaped its corridors the Boguls respawned and you were sent back in. "I don't know if I was maybe doing something like in *3D Monster Maze*, where if you got killed you got a one in two chance of coming out of that," Malcolm wonders. "If so, the end of *Corridors Of Genon* might have been me having another laugh at the player's expense!"

Although his next project – *Trashman* – delivered more laughs, *Corridors Of Genon* was Malcolm's final first-person perspective game. Decades later, Malcolm is pleased that his 3D games are still popular and appreciated. "Everything after *Corridors Of Genon* was up against the limits of the Spectrum – that's why I changed perspectives," Malcolm says. "I could still make the games 3D-ish, but they weren't in first-person perspective, I think in my mind I'd exhausted the 3D capability of the Spectrum. So I'm just astounded that people still enjoy playing my 3D games, but I'm proud of that."

STAGES OF EVOLUTION: IMPOSSIBLE ODDS

From endless mazes and countless invaders to being tied in knots

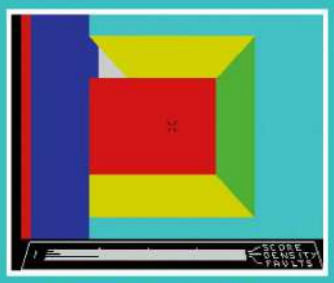


3D MONSTER MAZE

Technically, *3D Monster Maze* isn't impossible; you can appeal if Rex catches you, which gives you 50/50 odds of being eaten or being freed, which is represented by the game resetting. This risky option aside, *3D Monster Maze* is an endless series of mazes for the tireless T-rex to hunt you in.

3D DEFENDER

You're on a one-way mission in *3D Defender*. Your opposition is an entire fleet of UFOs, and the more you dispatch the more attack, first in pairs and ultimately in groups of four. Your radar and proximity meter give you a fighting chance, but once your shields fail, you're blown to oblivion.



KNOT IN 3D

Whether *Knot In 3D* comes to an end or not is an unanswered question. What's for sure is that its stiff challenge makes it next to impossible to find out. Typically, you rack up way too many faults before netting nearly enough points to see if the game ends after its hardest phase is beaten.

TURBOPAD
TURBOGRAFX
Select
Run

TURBOPAD
Select
Run

Select
Run

TurboPad fact

■ The version of the TurboPad included with the TurboGrafx-16 Mini is a closer visual match to the original than the PC Engine Mini and CoreGrafx Mini controllers, as there was no NEC logo to omit.

TurboPad

» **PLATFORM:** TurboGrafx-16 » **RELEASED:** 1989
» **COST:** $19.99 (launch), £40+ (boxed, today), £15+ (unboxed, today)

When revising the PC Engine controller for the North American market, NEC decided not to make too many changes. The most obvious and least functionally significant is the aesthetic overhaul. While the basic shape and style of the controller remain unchanged from the Japanese original, ensuring that it retained the familiarity of the NES layout with slight ergonomic improvements, the colour scheme was revamped – black, orange and yellow to match the TurboGrafx styling.

The other two changes are more substantial. Firstly, turbo switches were added to the I and II buttons, allowing players to enjoy rapid fire and further supporting the console's new name. These switches offered two different rates of fire for greater flexibility than most turbo controllers, so they were a welcome addition. Secondly, NEC inexplicably decided to change the controller connector. The circular design is similar, but the TurboGrafx port is larger and has a different pinout, creating a regional incompatibility between PC Engine and TurboGrafx pads. This actually gets worse, though – when the TurboDuo was introduced to North America, it returned to the original PC Engine controller connector style. This means that the original TurboPad requires an adaptor for compatibility with the TurboDuo. ✱

ESSENTIAL GAME
BONK'S REVENGE

Apart from the fact that *Bonk*'s second outing is one of the very best games available for the console, it's actually a game that benefits highly from the use of the turbo switches on the controller. While Bonk is in mid-air, by pressing the II button rapidly you can send him in and out of his diving headbutt move, slowing his descent and allowing him to glide about the place. While this might feel like cheating, rest assured that this is a legitimate tactic – in fact, it's even mentioned by the game's North American manual. Do you need any other endorsement?

SYSTEM SUPPLIED BY **EVAN AMOS**

Minority Report

INTERESTING GAMES YOU'VE NEVER PLAYED

BBC MICRO

The BBC Micro launched nearly 40 years ago. Despite having only eight colours and limited RAM, it gave us such seminal classics as Elite, The Sentinel and Repton. Let's take a look at some of the system's hidden gems...

Words by Richard Hallas

3D POOL

■ DEVELOPER: **FIREBIRD** ■ YEAR: **1989**

» [BBC Micro] Positioning the cue ball in the 'D' prior to making the initial break.

» [BBC Micro] At the start of a game, against the computer opponent Flash Harry.

All popular platforms had their star programmers who single-handedly produced games that were unusually original, spectacularly well-written or just downright remarkable in the technical feats they pulled off. One such BBC Micro coder was 'Orlando Marshall Pilchard QC', who later revealed himself as one Nick Pelling. Orlando's catalogue of BBC releases was small but highly regarded. His first BBC project was *Arcadians*, commissioned by Acornsoft, but he became best known for his surreal platform game *Frak!*.

Nick Pelling earned a reputation as a skilled writer of BBC technical demos and game engines, but he later expressed regret that he hadn't turned more of them into published games. One such demo involved an arrangement of 3D balls animating in patterns, and a colleague's suggestion that he should turn it into a game prompted the idea of creating a 3D implementation of pool.

Naturally enough, the initial version of *3D Pool* was for the BBC (he also produced an Electron version and, later, one for Game Boy Color). It would prove to be his last BBC game and also his first 16-bit one (for Atari ST). Nick also did substantial work on *3D Pool* for Acorn's 32-bit Archimedes. Unfortunately, at around this time British Telecom decided to divest itself of its software publishing arm, MicroProse took over and the Archimedes version was never completed. The move also scuppered the expected tie-in with 'Maltese Joe' Barbara, who was European pool champion at the time. His name was removed from the game title, packaging and advertising, though oddly enough the game itself retained a loading screen featuring a rendition of the champion player under the title '*Maltese Joe Barbara's 3D Pool*', and his name remained in the game. Perhaps the loss of the official association with Maltese Joe was no bad thing for the game's long-term reputation, however, given that Joe himself was jailed in 1995 for forging £1.5 million in bank notes!

As for the game itself... it plays pool. As you'd expect from the author of *FireTrack*, though, it's technically extremely well-implemented. It's not fast, as it's clearly pushing the limits of a 32K BBC Micro, but pool is an unhurried game and the graphics are flicker-free and convincing, even in the BBC's low-resolution screen mode, and the simulation of the physical interaction of the balls is

IF YOU LIKE THIS TRY...

ARCHER MACLEAN'S POOL
AMIGA

■ Where *3D Pool* led the way, others followed. One of the best alternatives was *Archer Maclean's Pool* (Virgin, 1992); it was a sequel to *Jimmy White's Whirlwind Snooker*, by the same author, and offered a choice of UK and US pool variants, played against humans or computer AI opponents of dubious skill.

HOLED OUT!
ARCHIMEDES, BBC MICRO, ELECTRON

■ *Leader Board* arrived on all popular formats in the late Eighties, except the BBC. But never fear, Gordon J Key was on hand! His similar *Holed Out!* was superb on the Archimedes, and his surprisingly good BBC conversion (shown here) used dithering to imply many more colours than the four that were actually on the screen.

E-TYPE
ARCHIMEDES, BBC MICRO, ELECTRON

■ *E-Type* (Gordon J Key again!) was the definitive Archimedes *Out Run* clone. The BBC conversion is superb, too, despite having been written in only a fortnight. Memory constraints led to the inclusion of a controversial last-minute feature, though: the need to refuel the car by knocking down policemen!

» [BBC Micro] Computer opponent Flash Harry is thinking about his shot.

convincing. The game features a range of AI players, so you can play against the computer or another person, or even let your machine play against itself. And, unlike any previous game of its type, *3D Pool* was notable for presenting a player's-eye view of the table.

3D Pool may not be the most action-packed of games, and it arrived late enough in the life of the BBC Micro that it's not a well-remembered release on the platform. But it was a technical triumph at the time, and a fitting final showpiece in Nick Pelling's BBC programming career. It was also another example of the BBC Micro being instrumental in the creation of something quite seminal.

IN DEPTH

COLOUR CODE
■ This indicator shows Player One's colour, with the cue ball indicating it's Player One's turn; the opponent's colour is shown in the opposite corner.

POWER PLAY
■ The power bar lets you judge how strong your shot is going to be before you take it.

'+' MARKS THE SPOT
■ The reference ball shows the point (black '+') where you're going to strike the cue ball to add spin and swerve.

EYES ON THE PRIZE
■ *3D Pool* gives you a player's-eye view, with the ability to move around the table and adjust the view up and down as well as in and out.

Minority Report

CONTRAPTION

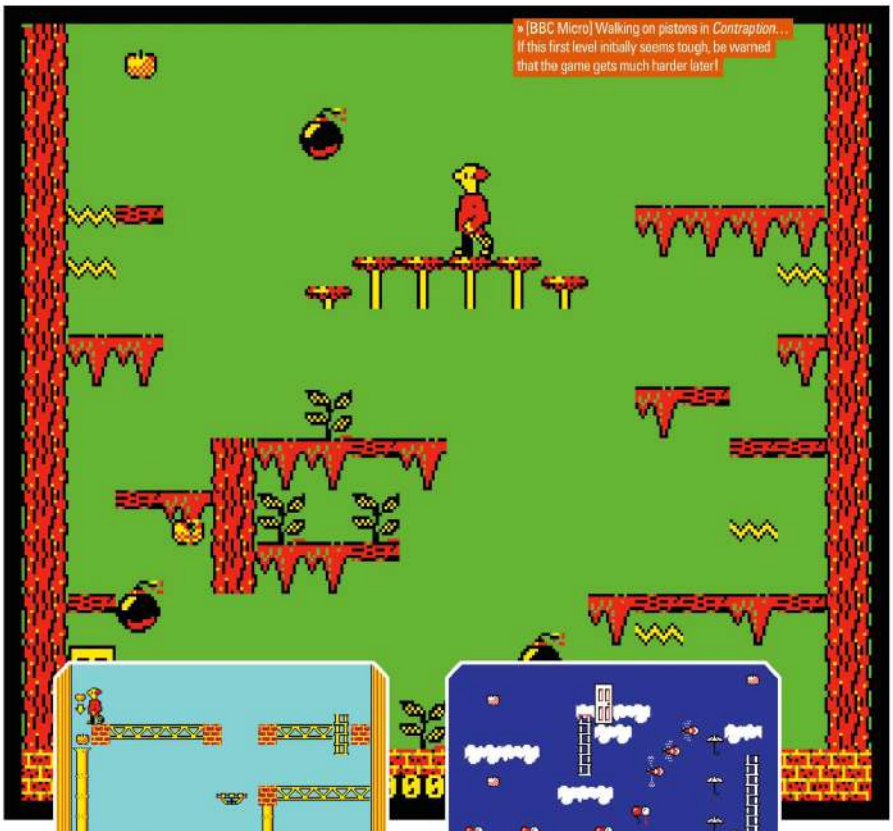
■ PUBLISHER: **ICON SOFTWARE** ■ YEAR: **1985**

Ask anyone to name a BBC platform game and chances are it'll be *Frak!* by 'Orlando'. It made a huge impression on its release in 1984, not least for its large, detailed graphics, use of the full screen and unusual sideways-scrolling levels.

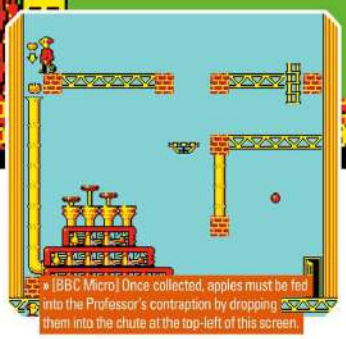
Splendid though *Frak!* may have been, it wasn't the only show in town. Another great example, which arrived in the following year, was *Contraption* by Dave and Helen Mann. Inexplicably, this title seems to have been as universally and comprehensively overlooked as *Frak!* is celebrated. Indeed, it's so widely forgotten that the ZX Spectrum and MSX conversions appear to have been entirely lost to history and are nowhere to be found online. (Happily, the Amstrad CPC version does survive.)

Like *Frak!*, *Contraption* features attractively detailed graphics that make full use of the whole screen area, at a time when most platform games used chunky graphics in only about two-thirds of the display. The gameplay is routine enough in concept. You play a professor who has to collect apples to feed into his contraption, and to that end you jump around the screen on both solid and crumbling platforms, avoiding mobile and static killer objects and heading for the exit door. So far, so *Manic Miner*. Unoriginal it may be, but the setting is appealingly whimsical and the game is fun – albeit very difficult!

The game was extremely well-reviewed on its release, with universal praise directed at its graphics, and at least two reviewers claimed to find *Contraption* a better offering than *Frak!*. Try both games and make your own judgement about that. What's clear, though, is that *Contraption* doesn't deserve to be so forgotten.



» [BBC Micro] Walking on pistons in *Contraption*... If this first level initially seems tough, be warned that the game gets much harder later!



» [BBC Micro] Once collected, apples must be fed into the Professor's contraption by dropping them into the chute at the top-left of this screen.

» [BBC Micro] Ducks in bathtubs and doors in the sky... *Contraption* presents an appropriate level of whimsy in the grand tradition of *Manic Miner*.

MORE GAMES TO PLAY

» ARCADIANS

■ PUBLISHER: **ACORNSOFT**
■ YEAR: **1982**

■ *Arcadians*, a version of *Galaxians*, was Orlando's first BBC Micro game and is an exercise in precision shooting. If you want some more frenetic firing, try his next game, *Zalaga* (a version of *Galaga*, if you couldn't guess), but in *Arcadians* timing is critical if you want to succeed in striking the swooping aliens. For fans of the genre, Acornsoft's *Super Invaders* (by Geoff Crammond, legendary author of *Aviator*, *Revs*, *Sentinel* and *Stunt Car Racer*) is similarly precise.

» CITADEL 2

■ PUBLISHER: **SUPERIOR SOFTWARE, ACORNSOFT**
■ YEAR: **1993**

■ The type of multiscreen adventures common on the ZX Spectrum were barely known on the BBC until the 1985 arrival of *Citadel*, which was hugely popular and spawned many spin-offs. What's not widely known is that Superior published a sequel, *Citadel 2* (albeit by a different author), eight years later. It was almost certainly the last new BBC game to be released commercially, but what a great way to finish!

» CRAZEE RIDER

■ PUBLISHER: **SUPERIOR SOFTWARE, ACORNSOFT**
■ YEAR: **1986**

■ The BBC was well-endowed with racing games, from simple ones like *Overdrive*, to Geoff Crammond's mighty simulation *Revs*. *Crazee Rider* was pretty much *Pole Position* with motorbikes rather than cars. It had many tracks to race on and was terrific fun without being too concerned with realism. It's still great fun today, and was probably the best of its genre on the BBC... at least until *E-Type* came along.

» HOBGOBLIN II

■ PUBLISHER: **ATLANTIS**
■ YEAR: **1990**

■ The original *Hobgoblin* was released for Acorn Electron, ZX Spectrum, Commodore 64 and Amstrad CPC, and was a demanding scrolling action game, reminiscent of *Ghosts 'N Goblins*. What made its sequel so unusual was that it was released exclusively for the 8-bit Acorns. Surprisingly, its graphics were less attractive than those of the original, but this sequel is still a big improvement, having more gameplay variety and being less unfair on the player.

IMOGEN

■ PUBLISHER: **MICRO POWER** ■ YEAR: **1986**

■ Micro Power's *Imogen* was a classic one-off that arrived out of nowhere, was unlike anything else and left an indelible mark. Its author, Michael St Aubyn, already had a couple of earlier games published, including Acornsoft's *Volcano*, but he wrote *Imogen* as an example of the sort of game he preferred to play himself: one that required lateral thinking rather than lightning reflexes.

Although it looks like a platform adventure game, and has delightfully well-drawn and whimsical (if slightly flickery) graphics, *Imogen* is nothing more or less than a visually rich brain-teaser. The puzzles are fancifully humorous, sometimes involve graphical wordplay and are challenging yet fair. As the author himself noted, *Imogen*'s puzzles were influenced by *Looney Tunes*' Road Runner and Edward De Bono (he of 'lateral thinking' fame) in roughly equal measure.

Your character is the eponymous wizard; sadly, we never discover why he has a traditionally female name. Imogen's task is to escape a series of caverns by using his ability to transform into other creatures: a monkey, which can climb; a cat, which can leap; and (in just one level) a bird, which can fly. But Imogen can only change form a limited number of times, and if he runs out of transformations it becomes impossible to escape.

» [BBC Micro] *Imogen* is full of beautifully drawn and animated creatures, such as these mice playing ball with each other.

RETRO STINKER

» TRENCH

■ VIRGIN ■ 1984

■ Remember those *Star Wars* games where you fly down a trench to blow up the Death Star? Well, this is the worst one ever written. You get killed by random lasers out of nowhere the moment you start playing!

» MAGIC MUSHROOMS

■ PUBLISHER: **ACORNSOFT**
■ YEAR: **1985**

■ Neil Raine wrote *Acornsoft Meteors*, *Planetoid*, *Hopper*, *Bandit* and *Magic Mushrooms*, went on to implement Acorn's world-leading RISC OS outline font system and tragically died in a hang-glider accident aged 45. *Magic Mushrooms* is incredibly polished, with smooth, flicker-free graphics. It can be frustrating because of the monsters' unpredictable movements, but it's good fun and includes a level editor.

» NUTCRAKA

■ PUBLISHER: **SOFTWARE PROJECTS**
■ YEAR: **1984**

■ *Nutcraka* is the perfect game with which to disprove the claim that programmers can neither draw nor hold a tune. A hat tip, then, to JM Phillips, who not only designed and coded *Nutcraka* but gave it some of the cutest graphics of any platform game and, notably, a devilishly catchy earworm of a tune to match. Presenting an unusual side-scrolling platformer format, *Nutcraka* is tough but deeply appealing.

» SPACE ADVENTURE

■ PUBLISHER: **VIRGIN**
■ YEAR: **1983**

■ You could say that *Space Adventure* isn't much of an adventure, and that most of what you see on the screen is empty space. It's not a deep or complex game, and yet… it's surprisingly fun to play. The animated graphics are exceptionally smooth and the gameplay is very precise and quite challenging, yet there's always a sense that if you take care, there's a realistic prospect that you might actually complete the game.

» STAR CLASH

■ PUBLISHER: **GREMLIN**
■ YEAR: **1987**

■ Ever wonder what *Elite* would be like if you ripped out the complexities like trading to leave just a 3D shoot-'em-up? Wonder no more, as *Star Clash* is that game. Unfortunately, though, the similarities are more than superficial: *Star Clash* really *is Elite* at heart. Although he denied it, the programmer clearly stole large chunks of code from *Elite* to make his derivative game. Gremlin quickly withdrew it when the truth emerged.

Knight Lore

» **PLATFORM:** AMSTRAD CPC » **RELEASED:** 1984 » **DEVELOPER:** ULTIMATE PLAY THE GAME

Ultimate's adventure certainly wasn't the first isometric game you would have encountered on a home computer, but it was arguably the most impressive you would have seen back in 1984.

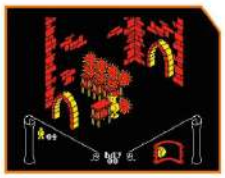
Tim and Chris Stamper seemingly pushed your Amstrad to breaking point, delivering an exciting world to discover as you went about your quest to free Sabreman from the deadly curse he'd found himself afflicted with. Despite a move to the third dimension and the loss of his trusty sword, Sabreman was still recognisable as the avatar you'd controlled in both *Sabre Wulf* and *Underwurlde*, but that appearance certainly wouldn't last as you navigated your way through the 128 rooms that the Stampers had so meticulously constructed. For you see, that curse Sabreman had caught in the wulf's jungle domain was the curse of lycanthropy... and the full moon is fast approaching. Our hero abruptly stops and you watch in wonderment as he contorts and twitches before your very eyes, only to be replaced with a new lupine form. It's the kind of moment that stays with you forever, and each painful-looking transformation pushed you forward to find an antidote to Sabreman's malady. ✱

BIO

Created by the legendary Stamper brothers, *Knight Lore* once again cast you as Sabreman, the pith helmet-wearing hero who had found success in *Sabre Wulf* and *Underwurlde*. *Knight Lore* still required you to traverse many rooms of danger, but now the location was a castle and everything was presented in an isometric viewpoint the Stampers dubbed 'filmation'. While Sabreman's new adventure was nowhere near as action-packed as his earlier ones, it was no less dangerous, and a lack of weapons meant you had to keep your wits about you if you hoped to find a cure for your deadly curse.

MORE CLASSIC KNIGHT LORE MOMENTS

Death From Above



Ultimate's game is full of trap-filled rooms that can be terrifying to navigate. You'll often find yourself in a situation like this one, where spiked death hangs precariously above your head and the only way to get past it is to gingerly move whatever objects are beneath. It makes for a real 'heart in your mouth' moment.

Meeting The Wizard

At last! You've been traipsing around the castle for what feels like an eternity and you finally find the wizard's base. Elation turns to horror when you suddenly realise that the wizard's cauldron will only accept a specific item and wouldn't you know, it's the one item you don't currently have on you. Doh!

A CPC Win

It's difficult being an Amstrad owner as you often have to make do with inferior Spectrum ports. Not so with *Knight Lore*, though. While it's admittedly very similar to the Spectrum original in terms of looks, it does benefit from additional colours, which adds some much-needed atmosphere and gives Amstrad owners a well-deserved victory.

Taming The Beast

Your lupine form in *Knight Lore* is more than just a cosmetic change. You'll soon realise that some jumps are easier to make in this shape, but you'll also discover that certain enemies will take an instant dislike to you, so make sure you're know where those dangerous denizens are when you start exploring the castle at night.

ULTIMATE GUIDE

DRAGON

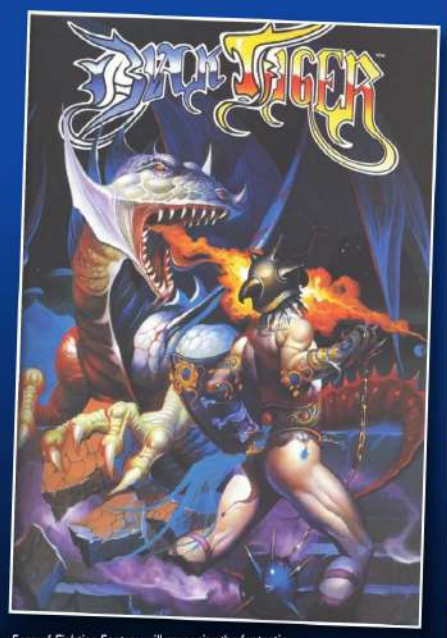
LONG LONG AGO, THREE DRAGONS DESCENDED AND DESTROYED THE KINGDOM. FROM THE ASHES RISES A HERO, ARMED AND ARMOURED, PRIMED TO RESCUE THE WISE MEN, DESTROY THE ENEMIES AND FREE THE WORLD. PICK UP THAT FLAIL AND FIGHT!

WORDS BY GRAEME MASON

By the mid-to-late Eighties, it was almost impossible to switch on the TV or go to the cinema without being confronted by a bare-chested hyper muscular barbarian of some description. Mattel cartoon *He-Man And The Masters Of The Universe* was still popular, as were the Arnold Schwarzenegger *Conan* movies, and the phenomenon had already permeated arcades. Atari's *Gauntlet* sported a powerful tank character simply named Warrior, while Tecmo's Rygar strode across various desolate landscapes, slicing anything that approached with his deadly diskarmour weapon. Then, in 1987, two more brawny heroes duked it out: Taito's savage Rastan and Black Tiger, whom, like Rygar, wields a chained weapon to slay his enemies, this time a powerful metal sphere complete with multiple sharp points.

Black Tiger, released by Capcom in 1987, offers little originality in terms of background story. Three demonic dragons, defined by their colours, have invaded the eponymous hero's kingdom, bringing darkness and destruction. Throughout the remnants of the land, the hero must travel, killing the numerous devilish minions of the dragons, before facing off against the powerful beasts themselves. Known as *Black Dragon* in Japan (a confusing prominence for the game's antagonist rather than protagonist), the game superficially shares much with Capcom's biggest hit at this point in time, *Ghosts 'N Goblins*. Black Tiger, like Arthur, throws knives and also wears a suit of armour that disappears should he take too many hits. And while the fantastical landscape is a little less based on reality, there are plenty of familiar enemies, including deadly plants, skeletons and that annoying flying imp, Red Arremer.

But to call *Black Tiger* a clone of the famous spooky adventure would do it a massive disservice. The beefy star wields a chained flail that is enormous fun to use, despite its limited range, while also hurling the knives in a lethal and simultaneous ranged attack. And while the game is very far from anyone's idea of a complex RPG, there are a number of extra elements that elevate the gameplay beyond the usual hack-and-slash efforts of the era. Vanquished enemies drop coins of a currency known as 'zenny'; these can be used at various points throughout the game after the player has rescued one of the petrified old wise men who are scattered around each level. Also littering the levels are fragile pots, each of which contain an item of varying usefulness. The most beneficial objects here are skeleton



Fans of *Fighting Fantasy* will recognise the fantastic art of Peter Andrew Jones for the US Gold box art.

BATTLE-READY TIGER
A fearsome sight, the Black Tiger stands battle-ready, his flail circulating around his arm and ready to strike.

> "It turned out the US arm of Data East had created a C64 version, but it was so poor that US Gold decided to delay the release"
>
> Mark Hughes

CONVERSION CAPERS

HOW DID THE BLACK TIGER FARE OUT OF THE ARCADES?

AMSTRAD CPC

Alas, another poor Spectrum port plagues the Amstrad CPC, reducing *Black Tiger* to a rather dull and unsightly platform game. There's at least a tune to enjoy but it's fairly unrecognisable to the arcade ditty, and the choppy, erratic scrolling is the rotten cherry on the top of this very disappointing slice of gaming cake. The Amstrad deserved better than this.

AMIGA

This Commodore 16-bit port looks the business but things start going badly wrong as soon as you start to play the thing. Disappointingly, the fast pace of the C64 version is totally lost with a jerky framerate that completely hampers play. Sacrificing visuals for a smoother game would have been much better, but no doubt that wouldn't have looked as good on the back of the box...

ATARI ST

A sharp, beefed-up display makes this the most attractive of *Black Tiger* home conversions, and it probably just about edges it in terms of gameplay, too. Weak sound effects and lack of in-game music aside, the hero bounces around the levels satisfactorily despite the uneven scrolling, and it's the best of the home ports, even though that's not saying much given the competition.

COMMODORE 64

The dreaded multiload is inevitably back for this conversion, and no doubt gamers back in the Eighties felt like there was more time waiting around than actually playing. Yet while there's still a large portion of the game missing, it actually moves at a good lick which at least replicates the frantic pace of the arcade original, despite the muddy visuals. The best of the 8-bit ports.

ZX SPECTRUM

First previewed in the summer of 1988, it was almost two years before this US Gold game finally surfaced. It's an admirable attempt to squeeze in the colourful and busy arcade original, and while lacking the aforementioned colour, the game does at least move at a decent pace, and the graphics are detailed enough to be recognisable.

NINJA

COIN

[Arcade] The advice that the wise men offer up is very far from wise and not very helpful at all.

keys – used to open the copious treasure chests that are also scattered around the world – and potions, which automatically cure any poison that the *Black Tiger* may have swimming around in his veins. Given these poisons can hamper his fighting ability (such as by removing his knives), or even reverse the player controls, it's helpful to always have a supply of these bottles stuffed down your loincloth. The treasure chests themselves must be opened with care: most contain a reward of some description, but on occasion, deadly flames will spout out.

Each level of *Black Tiger* is a thorny maze of platforms, traps and climbable structures, so it's fortunate that its star is not only strapping, but also athletic, able to leap from pole to pole while hurling his flail at any enemy reckless enough to come near him. Dotted around the display are the aforementioned grey statues, and touching one releases the prisoner from his stony incarceration. Upon gaining freedom, these bearded wise men are eternally grateful, offering either the wares from their shop, money or a valuable tip on how to play the game. The shop offers four different types of weapon and armour power-ups, plus the option to buy more keys and potions should you be running short. Of course, whatever you choose, you're going to need plenty of that shiny zenny in order to make a purchase.

[Arcade] Black Tiger is an athletic chap, able to rise comfortably on any obstruction.

Apart from Red Arremer, deadly plants and disappearing armour, *Black Tiger* also shares a horrendous level of difficulty with its famous antecedent. Enemies are soon descending constantly upon the lone hero, often spitting venom or fire, and each level must be approached with care given that foes frequently respawn all around the lead character. With its cluttered display, keeping track of health and armour is another complication, and as with *Ghosts 'N Goblins*, there's plenty of fussy platform action later in the game, with the eight-directional gameplay of *Black Tiger* making negotiating the stages within the time limit an even trickier prospect. Each level contains sub-dungeons that contain wise men, more enemies and treasures. Given that a certain amount of wise men must be rescued in order to proceed, exploration of all areas is required; fortunately, the game is sprinkled with directional signs which helpfully point the way to the exits, and the

BOSS RUSH

THE BIG BADS BLACK TIGER MUST SLAY

TWO STONE FACES

These two oblong statues wait for you at the end of the first level. They slowly leap over each other, with their touch deadly to Black Tiger.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

As you approach, try and land a few hits before they've even moved. Then it's just a simple matter of dodging their clumsy jumps.

FIRE DEMON

FOUR STONE FACES

While not exactly original, it's double the trouble as four of the rectangular bouncing monoliths gang up on Black Tiger at the end of level two.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

Make sure you don't get trapped in the corners by constantly nipping underneath, while flinging the flail and knives.

ORC

BLUE DRAGON

The first of the dragon enemies that Black Tiger will face off against. This cobalt creature hurls fireballs and flies around the screen, jaws agape.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

Black Tiger's knives destroy fireballs, so slip underneath the beast to avoid getting trapped and take him down with the flail.

RED ARREMER

This devious little imp first appears as a ball, before transforming to an annoying creature familiar to *Ghosts 'N Goblins* fans. Only now he also hurls fiery spears!

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

The boss fights are ramped up here as Red Arremer swirls around Black Tiger. Use the posts to leap around and dodge him while hurling knives.

[Arcade] Chests contain goodies or traps.

[Arcade] Some levels feature a sub-dungeon which can be investigated, with care.

> "Once we got to play the arcade game, we weren't disappointed – it was a great arcade experience"
>
> Mark Hughes

WITCH

[Arcade] Stage one, like most of *Black Tiger*, takes place in an underground cavern of some sort.

[Arcade] Instant-death spikes pepper most stages.

THINKING TIGER

The Black Tiger pauses, contemplating his next move in the constant, energy-sapping battle to save the world.

SILVER DRACONIAN

The first of these man-dragon hybrids strides across the screen, wielding two massive blades. Watch out, as it's deceptively quick, and lethal.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

Leap over the creature and attack it from behind to avoid getting cornered. Keep your distance: those blades are deadly.

PETRIFIED OLD MAN

RED DRAGON

While similar to its predecessor, this crimson dragon has substantially more health and an additional fire attack that rakes across the ground.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

There's plenty of room to manoeuvre here, so take advantage and keep distance between you and the dragon, landing attacks when safe.

GOLD DRACONIAN

This second hybrid monster has an electrical fire attack that works in a similar way to the fire bomb attack of the red dragon.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

Use the platforms to jump over and send in a few attacks before the beast closes back in on you.

SKELETON

BLACK DRAGON

The final encounter is with the dragon boss, and it has more health and speed than the previous two. Take it down to end its reign of terror.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

Perseverance! It'll take a lot of dodging and firing to dispatch this dangerous villain and return peace to the realm.

RESCUED OLD MAN

CROUCHING TIGER

On his haunches, Black Tiger glances back, constantly alert to danger from behind as well as in front.

[Arcade] Some bosses make appearances in subsequent levels.

FOSSIL

Q&A: Mark Hughes

WE CHAT TO THE CODER BEHIND BLACK TIGER'S IMPRESSIVE COMMODORE 64 CONVERSION

Were you working for Softworks/Softworx when coding *Black Tiger*?
I was freelance, along with the guys I was working with. Our dev manager, Dave Baxter, insisted we needed a company name for our first cheque to be made out to, and he suggested the name Softworx. The name was never used again!

How did you get to work on *Black Tiger*?
When I was 16, my friend James and I sent game demos off to loads of companies in the hope of getting work. Dave was the dev manager at Elite Systems at the time, and he agreed to help us out with our first game, *Master Blaster*. Shortly after that was released, he moved to US Gold and invited us to create a demo of *Black Tiger*.

Had you coded much prior to *Black Tiger*, and who else did you work with?
Only *Master Blaster*. I was still at school, so had to juggle studying for exams and coding *Black Tiger*. There were four of us working on it, James Doyle and me on code, and two other friends from school on graphics. The music was supplied to us by Mark Tait who was working at Tiertex.

Were you familiar with the arcade game?
I'd never played the arcade game, but had seen double-page adverts for it in *Zzap*. It turned out the US arm of Data East had already created a Commodore 64 version, but it was so poor that US Gold decided to delay the release and look at a UK developer to take it on. We were sent a VHS tape of someone playing the first level, which we used as a reference to create the initial demo. To suddenly find out that US Gold was going to delay [its] release and let us create our own version was hugely exciting. Once we got to play the arcade game, we weren't disappointed – it was a great arcade experience.

Once past the demo, did you finally get an arcade machine to play?
Yes, a full-size arcade cabinet, which was delivered to my parent's garage once we had signed the contract. We spent a long time playing the game to become familiar with all the mechanics, and then it was moved to my friend's house so he could use it as a reference for creating the graphics.

Did you make many changes for your conversion? And how do you think you did in retrospect?
We had to take quite a few shortcuts, and concentrated on keeping it fast and fun. I remember the knives that the player fires out were added very late in development, and the collision for them was too expensive to keep the game running at 60Hz, so they're purely cosmetic. But for a bunch of schoolkids who'd only made one game before, I think we did pretty well. In hindsight, though, I'd probably want to change a lot, especially the level layouts. We didn't have access to a video camera at the time, so all the levels were a very rough approximation of the original.

POISONOUS PLANT

[Arcade] Upon the castle battlements for stage five.

[Arcade] Kill a boss and its skeleton briefly flickers.

checkpoints are frequent, resulting in less painful backtracking through the realm.

With many purchasing decisions to be made in the shops, bonus items hidden within walls and frantic boss battles, there's much to enjoy in this varied and mythical tale.

With American distribution handled by Romstar, *Black Tiger*'s standard upright cabinet offered little or no innovations. A central eight-way joystick controls both players alternately, with a jump and attack button the only other inputs. The marquee and side artwork is also a missed opportunity given the fantastic advert that was used to sell the arcade game. From a tanned hero, striding towards an impressive roaring dragon, the insipid and bland image that greeted arcadegoers above the screen was far from inspiring.

For its licensed home versions, US Gold made no such mistake, employing the services of artist Peter Andrew Jones, his appropriation of the original arcade advert a striking image of the brave barbarian facing off against a fire-spitting dragon.

[Arcade] Platform perils in the sixth level. Watch your step or you'll end up a kebab.

Despite its moderate success, a follow-up to *Black Tiger* was not forthcoming as Capcom concentrated on other properties. Rumours circulate that the PC Engine sequel, *SonSon II* was originally developed as a second *Black Tiger* game, although the reasons for the change are unknown. What remains is a creative and entertaining arcade game that, while admirable in its attempt to combine a coin-munching motive with more intricate RPG elements, doesn't quite achieve the heights of its more uncomplicated forebears such as *Ghosts 'N Goblins*. But if you're after a crunching challenge with substance, this is one dangerous cat that's well worth playing. ★

[Arcade] A wise man awaits freedom next to a lovely stained glass window in level seven.

> "For a bunch of schoolkids who'd only made one game before, I think we did well"
>
> Mark Hughes

RESTING TIGER

Job done, the Black Tiger retires, gaining some clothing and a moment of respite with a young lady as a reward.

-0013990
HI-0127630
-0
ENERGY
200
300

Mr Heli

IT'S HELI GOOD

» RETROREVIVAL

» ARCADE » 1987 » IREM

You have to hand it to Irem, it certainly knew how to make interesting and engaging arcade games back in the day. Take *Mr Heli* for example, or *Battle Chopper* as it was known in most western arcades. It took the cute elements of Sega's earlier *Fantasy Zone*, but it still managed to be typically Irem in that it had a distinctive stylistic aesthetic, it was as hard as proverbial nails and had some neat game mechanics that kept you shovelling money into its coin slot like there was no tomorrow.

Returning to it today and the first thing that hits you is just how brutally difficult it is. Enemies come hard and fast, and you're initially poorly equipped thanks to some weak ground bombs and a rocket that fires directly upwards. Break apart nearby rocks, however, and you'll discover crystals of different sizes that can be collected for various amounts of cash. You'll want to grab these gems before they come into contact with the ground, as they'll shatter and be worth less points.

Numerous power-ups are also found throughout *Mr Heli*'s stages – which often scroll in multiple directions – but they are typically hidden behind blocks, meaning lots of frantic laser blasting is required to dislodge them. Even when you've freed them from their granite tombs, you'll still need the required cash in order to unlock them and extend *Mr Heli*'s paltry arsenal – all while you keep an eye on your rapidly depleting health, which can also be topped up if you find the relevant power-up and have the spare cash to purchase it.

The end result is an endlessly frenetic juggling act as you attempt to manage your available resources while trying to work out if it's worth your time to stay in an area and completely mine it of gems. While this tactic certainly allows you to amass large amounts of cash, it also makes you a sitting duck for the constantly respawning enemies. It's a neat risk-and-reward mechanic in a game that's full of neat ideas, and it's another example of the hidden depths that hide under *Mr Heli*'s colourful visuals. Little wonder, then, that I'd always shovel money into it whenever I visited Quay Amusements. ✱

The History Of the Settlers

Tiny people invaded the Amiga in 1993, building a franchise that, despite several ups and downs, is still going strong some 27 years later

Words by Lewis Packwood

THOMAS HÄUSER

Thomas cofounded Funatics after he left Blue Byte in 1998, and later worked on *The Settlers II: 10th Anniversary* and *The Settlers: Heritage of Kings*.

"With *Settlers* we got lucky, it really caught people's attention," recalls Thomas Hertzler, cofounder of German studio Blue Byte. "It was the best game that we'd ever had the opportunity to deliver. We all thought it was the bee's knees." And best of all, it landed in the company's lap at a time when it was desperate for a hit to stave off bankruptcy.

Hertzler founded Blue Byte in August 1988 with Lothar Schmitt, initially operating out of Hertzler's attic in Mülheim. The two of them had previously worked together at Rainbow Arts, publisher of the *Super Mario Bros* 'homage' *The Great Giana Sisters*, but both were ready for a new challenge. "He and I, we hit it off pretty well, and so we decided to set up our own company, and that's what we did," recalls Hertzler. "[We were] young, naive and bulletproof – so sure, why not?"

Some of the first titles they released were *Great Courts* in 1989 (also known as *Jimmy Connor's Pro Tennis Tour*) and the turn-based tactics game *Battle Isle* in 1991. "I was into strategy games and Lothar was into sports games," says Hertzler, explaining the odd genre dichotomy. Both sold reasonably well, but Hertzler felt that *Battle Isle* in particular could have sold much more, and wondered whether that was down to the publisher, Ubisoft. "It's very hard to tell," he says, "Is it the lack of support from the publisher? Or is it just the game? When you do it yourself, you can tell, but if you have that middleman, you just don't know. And I think it could have done better."

So for the next game, 1992's *History Line: 1914-1918*, Blue Byte renegotiated its deal with Ubisoft, taking over publishing duties for Germany, Austria and Switzerland, and leaving the French firm to handle the rest of Europe. But although the game reviewed well, sales were underwhelming – something Hertzler puts down to choosing to depict World War I rather

» [Amiga] The flags on guard huts indicate how close they are to enemy territory: a solid cross means they're near the border, while a single line means they're further away.

» [Amiga] Thomas Hertzler says that the temptation was to keep adding features and buildings to *The Settlers*, but by the time it launched, "it was already the most complex product we'd ever done".

» [Amiga] You can tweak almost everything in *The Settlers*, like the ratio of wheat going to pig farms and windmills, and how much coal the gold foundry and toolmaker get.

» [Amiga] Building an efficient road network is essential. The icons indicate how steep the path is: the steeper it is, the slower the goods are carried.

than World War II. Suddenly, the pressure was on to find a hit.

That's when a student called Volker Wertich got in touch with a demo of what would become *The Settlers*. "We invited him up to Mülheim," says Hertzler. "He was in the southern part of Germany. So we met, and the first thing that came to mind was, 'Oh this looks a little bit like *Populous*.'" But any resemblance to Bullfrog's title was superficial – there had been nothing like *The Settlers* before. Volker's game presented a tiny but complicated economy, where little computer people ferried goods to and fro in real time (see 'Economics In Miniature'). "It looked great," says Hertzler.

Still, the graphics of the demo were basic, and there was little sense of place. "There wasn't much there," Hertzler recalls. "There was a lot of green, there was some brown for the pathways, and there was a building, so it was more technical, really." But Hertzler says they quickly decided on a setting and began to rapidly flesh out the game. "We chose medieval, and it all developed from there pretty much naturally," he tells us.

The Blue Byte team would handle graphics and sound in-house, while Volker programmed the

» [PC] The icons in *The Settlers II* show the size of building you can construct on any given space. Large buildings, like the farm, can only be built on castle icons.

» [PC] *The Settlers II* added a rudimentary story, which starts with a group of Romans exploring a series of islands.

» [PC] The castle looks radically different in *The Settlers II* as a result of the Roman theme, but the core gameplay is very similar to the original game.

game at his home some 250 miles away, keeping in touch with the Mülheim office via phone, fax and mail. Hertzler recalls that development proceeded relatively smoothly, despite the distance. "Volker was very organised. I think he had taken a year off from college to do this. He said from the beginning, 'After this, I'm going to continue my degree.'"

Almost the entire game was written in assembler code, and Hertzler still marvels at its technical wizardry. "I play *Civilization V*, which is turn-based, and on my 4GHz, Intel i7, blah blah PC, it still takes its sweet time when I'm done to calculate its moves. In *Settlers*, the baseline was the Amiga, so it had to work on an 8MHz Motorola 68k – and in real time." And in addition to plotting the paths of hundreds of tiny characters, *The Settlers* offered an impressive split-screen mode – something that Hertzler says everyone wanted at the time. "Everybody was telling us we need multiplayer. The retailers, the distributors, the editors: multiplayer, multiplayer, multiplayer."

Development took around a year, and Hertzler recalls that towards the end, the company was under enormous financial pressure. "Just a few months before release, Lothar my business partner decided to leave. After I had bought out Lothar, we were financially in dire straits. I mean, it was coming right down to the wire. One bank had kicked us out with a ridiculously small overdraft that we had at the time – I mean, it was nothing. There was something going on at the time in the

Economics in Miniature

How the buildings interlink in the original Settlers

LUMBERJACK'S HUT

■ This is probably the first thing you'll build. The lumberjack chops down trees, which can be sent to the sawmill to be made into planks.

FISHERMAN'S HUT

■ The fisherman is by far the easiest and cheapest way to get food for miners. With only a couple of boards, you've got yourself a fisherman's hut. Now you just need a lake.

QUARRYMAN'S HUT

■ The quarryman chips away at hunks of granite to make stone blocks, which are used – along with wood – to make guard huts and larger buildings, like windmills.

FOREST RANGER'S HUT

■ To enable a steady supply of logs, you'll need to plant new trees to replace the ones the lumberjack cuts down, which is where this happy chappy comes in.

SAWMILL

■ The sawmill turns logs into wooden boards, which are essential for making buildings. The shipmaker and toolmaker also need wood.

WHEAT FARM

■ The wheat farm needs a large expanse of flat ground around it for fields, and hence is a tricky one to place. The wheat heads off to the windmill and pig farm.

WAREHOUSE

■ When supply lines are stretched, this comes in handy to store goods where they're produced, rather than shipping them back to your castle.

IRON FOUNDRY

■ Iron ore is turned into iron at the foundry, then it goes off to the blacksmith to be made into weapons or the toolmaker to be made into, well, tools.

SHIPMAKER

■ The shipmaker is one building you will only rarely need to construct – it makes boats for 'roads' that go across water.

BLACKSMITH

■ This is essential for when you begin clashing with neighbours; the blacksmith churns out swords and shields for knights.

TOOL MAKER

■ You'll need a toolmaker to produce axes for lumberjacks, hammers for geologists, scythes for farmers, saws for sawmill workers and so on.

GOLD FOUNDRY

■ Gold ore is processed into solid gold ingots here. This provides motivation for your knights: the more gold they have, the more they will want to fight.

IT industry where two major players had gone belly-up, and so they got really careful and said, 'Look, we have to cancel your overdraft.' But I was able to find another bank, a local bank, and they carried us over – but if *Settlers* had flopped, I think we would have been done for."

Hertzler admits to working "crazy" hours at the time, and the long days and financial burden had a dramatic impact on his health. "It was pretty high stress, and I paid the price for it. I ended up being in hospital just before *Settlers* shipped. They took me in an ambulance because I thought I had a heart attack. It was the night before ECTS [European Computer Trade Show], and I was working on the loop video for the show on my Macintosh, and yeah, in a minute I was flat on the ground." The doctors told him that the episode was down to stress rather than heart failure, but Hertzler was still in hospital a few days later when he received news about the launch sales. "I remember that day," he says. "The accounting lady came in, and she ran down the numbers, and I'm like: 'Oh, well that's good.' 'Yeah, they're probably gonna order 20,000 more.' 'Oh, that's good!' It was great. The day after we were thinking, 'Okay, what are we gonna do next?'

"I think we sold 60,000 on day one in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. So that was incredible. I don't remember what Ubisoft sold at the time, but the numbers were pretty good – not so much in the United States." Interestingly, the strategy specialist SSI handled publishing duties in the States, where it decided to change the game's name to *Serf City: Life Is Feudal* – presumably in reference to *SimCity*. The American cover featured a cartoon peasant grinning insanely and holding a glinting hammer, while a malevolent head floated in the sky behind him – quite the difference from the friendly, rotund knight on the European box art.

Blue Byte had a much-needed hit on its hands in *The Settlers*. But when it came to making a sequel, Hertzler says it proved surprisingly difficult. "It was very clear [Volker] wasn't gonna do another game, which I couldn't understand because it was doing really well. But, you know, if you have traditional

» [PC] *The Settlers III* expanded the military ranks with swordsmen, bowmen and spearmen, which have a rock, paper, scissors relationship with one another.

» [PC] Temples were introduced in *The Settlers III*, and the players were able to call on divine intervention to do things like turn iron into gold.

» [PC] The three playable races in *The Settlers III* were the Egyptians, Romans and Asians. Each had different economic pathways and skills: for instance, the Romans can turn wood into charcoal.

"Everybody was telling us we need multiplayer. The retailers, the distributors, the editors: multiplayer, multiplayer, multiplayer"
THOMAS HÄUSER

WINDMILL
■ Wheat goes in, flour comes out – it's as simple as that. For maximum efficiency, you'll need to place the windmill near the wheat farm and bakery.

GRANITE MINE
■ Like the quarryman's hut, the granite mine spits out stones. Most buildings require stone blocks in their construction, so they are one of the most essential goods in the game.

COAL MINE
■ Coal is sent to the iron foundry, blacksmith and gold foundry to power the furnaces. If there's no coal, then there's no fire – and no weapons or gold, and you don't want that.

GOLD MINE
■ Towards the end of a game, when wars are kicking off all over the place, gold becomes crucial for motivating your army. Gold ore is sent from here to the gold foundry.

IRON MINE
■ Iron is a useful resource and used to make weapons and tools. Ore is taken from the mine to be processed at the iron foundry.

BAKERY
■ The baker turns flour into bread, which then goes off to feed those peckish miners. Weirdly, only miners need food in *The Settlers*.

BUTCHER
■ The next destination for porkers from the pig farm is the butcher. Ach, it's a hog's life. The meat then gets carted off to the miners for lunch.

PIG FARM
■ Wheat doesn't just go to the bakery – it also ends up at the pig farm to sate the hungry hogs. Swill is too good for them, it seems.

GUARD HUT
■ When a soldier occupies a guard hut, your border magically extends out around it, so they're essential for expanding your territory.

GUARD TOWER
■ Whereas a guard hut only houses three knights, a guard tower holds six, so they're handy for protecting hostile borders.

GARRISON
■ Garrisons take an enormous amount of wood and stone to build, but they house a whopping 12 knights, so they're great for massing your forces.

Evolution vs Tradition

HOW THE SETTLERS WAS BRIEFLY SPLIT INTO TWO SUB-SERIES

In a response to fans who criticised the changes made to the *Settlers* formula over the years, Ubisoft decided to split the series into two strands – 'tradition' and 'evolution' – starting with a tenth-anniversary remake of *The Settlers II* to kick off the 'tradition' strand in 2006. Thomas Häuser, who directed the original version of *The Settlers II*, was brought in to help out on the remake, and the game also spawned an expansion called *Die Nächste Generation – Wikinger* (*The Next Generation – Vikings*), although this was only available in the game's core market of Germany. A standalone sequel in the same vein, *Die Siedler: Aufbruch Der Kulturen* (*The Settlers: Rise Of Cultures*) was released in 2008, again only in Germany, and was developed by Häuser's company, Funatics.

In an interview with *Eurogamer Germany* in 2008, *Aufbruch Der Kulturen* game designer Kathleen Kunze responded to the question of why Ubisoft had decided to split the series: "So basically it wasn't our decision, but the decision of the fans. There are people who say, 'We want to continue this old *Settlers* concept.' You have a lot of fun playing the old *Settlers II* concept. And then we have the people who always want new things. It developed more or less that way. Because of this, there was a lot of disagreement in the community. It was decided to label the things as 'tradition' and 'evolution'. And that's where the whole thing came from." [Translated from German.]

The Settlers II remake stayed faithful to the game mechanics of the original, with road building and without the direct control over settlers that was introduced in *The Settlers III*, but it updated the game with 3D graphics and made the different races more visually distinct, as well as added minor tweaks such as the ability to upgrade military buildings. Its expansion introduced the Vikings as a playable faction, while *Aufbruch Der Kulturen* introduced different economic models for each race and altered a few parts of the economy: for example, making bread required salt as well as flour and water.

The 'tradition' strand didn't last long, however: *Aufbruch Der Kulturen* marked the final entry in the series' offshoot.

parents, German parents, 'You gotta get your degree.' You know, 'You're not gonna do that game stuff. No, no, no, you got to get a real job!'"

And with Volker gone, there was little appetite among the rest of the team for doing a sequel. Thomas Häuser, who had joined Blue Byte back in 1988 when he was still at school, recalls that they regarded *The Settlers II* as a possibility rather than an inevitability. "When we started thinking about *Settlers II*, it was really a discussion of if we wanted to do a follow-up. These were not the days where every year you do one version of a game."

Hertzler was keen to capitalise on the first game's success, but he remembers it was no easy task to bring the team around. "It took me a while to convince my in-house guys to take over. It was so difficult – 'Oh we don't want to do it, we want to do something new.' Nobody wanted it. It wasn't theirs. I had almost given up, where I'm like, 'You know, maybe they're right. Maybe we should do something original.'"

He did manage to get the team on board eventually, with Thomas Häuser in the role of project lead. Still, this initial reluctance doesn't fully explain the three-year gap between the release of *The Settlers* in 1993 and its sequel in 1996. Häuser says that he's not sure why it took so long, as the game certainly didn't take three years to develop. "I don't know what happened in between. I know that I worked on some games that were cancelled, I think that might be 1993, 1994. But after we decided to go with *Settlers II* [...] from my mind, the development was not much more than one year."

"It was really difficult to motivate them at the beginning," recalls Hertzler. "I think it was halfway through, maybe, when things came together, and everybody got more excited about it." Häuser agrees: "Something which I've learned over the years is when you start a new project, often you do not fall in love immediately. But while doing the game, you find motivation in [the] details and working with the team, and stuff like this."

The team also faced some technical challenges. By this point, the Amiga was on its way out, so development switched to PC – a format that Häuser was unfamiliar with. "I'd done Amiga and Super Nintendo stuff before, and *The Settlers II* was my first big PC game," he says, "so the first time using a C compiler instead of assembler and stuff like this. It was quite challenging because ultimately we wanted to do it in C and not to fall back to the assembler."

On the other hand, Häuser had a clear plan in mind for the sequel. He had done some QA on the first *Settlers* game, and made a few notes at the time about things he didn't like and what he might add or change. "I took these notes to Thomas Hertzler, and we discussed it, and he said something like, 'Go for it,'" Häuser recalls.

"One of the most important things was, first of all, to have more modern graphics," he continues. "It was not state of the art, but it was much more detailed and [had] much more animation." Generally though, Häuser says he wanted to keep the core of the sequel exactly the same. "I wasn't thinking about changing the game too much, because the basic ideas of, you know, the transport systems, the flags and the carriers walking around,

» [PC] *The Settlers IV* introduced the Vikings as a playable race for the first time. The Vikings, Romans and Mayans eventually team up against the game's big baddy, the Dark Tribe.

» [PC] *The Settlers IV* adopted a similar graphical and gameplay style to the previous game. Again, carriers mill around freely rather than standing on roads.

it was something which was set for me at this time. Later on in the *Settlers* history you see that this drifted away. But for me, *Settlers* was based on this transportation system optimising."

Nevertheless, the sequel introduced several new elements, including hunters, breweries, wells and catapults. The game's setting was also pushed back in time to the Roman era, and Häuser added in a few rudimentary story beats. "There was some minor text which was sort of the storyline," he says. "But I think from today's point of view, we could have done much better with this." Still, Hertzler thinks that, ultimately, the story isn't too important in the *Settlers* games: "You don't really have to have a consistent story, it's not like it takes you from one part in this story in the universe to another part – it's a *Settlers* game."

Häuser says that the final push to the game's finish in 1996 was stressful because another Blue Byte game, *Archimedean Dynasty*, had slipped, meaning the mastering of *The Settlers II* was brought forward. "I think I spent five days nonstop working on the title in the office just to get it done," he recalls. "And it wasn't just me, it was the whole team, and it was very intense."

Still, the glowing reviews of the game made up somewhat for the difficulties, he says. "The first time we saw something like a 90-point rating we were, of course, very enthusiastic, and yeah, it was great for us. The most rewarding experience was if you talked to people on the streets later on, and they had played your game."

After finishing *The Settlers II*, Häuser worked on several other Blue Byte titles, like *Extreme Assault*, but ultimately decided to leave in 1998. He felt that the company had changed by then. "The spirit got a little bit lost, it was more a business and it was more marketing-driven," he says. That meant it was all change again for the next entry in the series.

Volker Wertich came back on board for *The Settlers III*, released in 1998, and he had a few ideas on how to change the formula. This was the first game to feature online multiplayer, and players could also choose between three very different races. But one of the biggest changes was ditching the road system; instead, *The Settlers III* featured something similar to 'desire lines'. "Depending on how many times a settler would walk over a certain path," says Hertzler, "the footprints would stay in place and it would create a path. And depending on how frequently somebody would walk across it, it would turn into a road. And some people liked that, and some people didn't like that."

The graphics also changed radically, with a much chunkier style, and the game added many more buildings, like temples and marketplaces, as well as residences that would generate settlers rather than them spawning in a castle. But the most dramatic change was that now players could individually select and move settlers by clicking on them.

Despite these fairly big rethinks, some reviewers criticised the game for being too similar to the last one, with *IGN* declaring "there's nothing really new or innovative here". Such negative points had little impact on the series' soaring sales figures, however. "It was a steady way

» [PC] Blue Byte head Thomas Hertzler says he would have taken the series in a different direction after *The Settlers IV*, fearing the games might get stale: "The question was, how long does it last? How much further can we take it?"

» [PC] Thomas Hertzler tells us that the sales figures for the *Settlers* series were steadily increasing at the point he left: "Numbers were going up and up and up."

» [PC] A series of tutorials in *The Settlers IV* take new players through the basics – and by this point in the series, there's a lot to take in.

» [PC] *Heritage Of Kings* is much more story-focused than earlier entries, beginning with the hero Dario defending a village from the dreaded Black Knights.

» [PC] There's more of an RPG feel to *Heritage Of Kings*, with the player's hero character accepting 'quests' from NPCs – who naturally have exclamation marks over their heads.

In the Style of... GAMES INSPIRED BY THE SETTLERS

ANNO 1602

■ Developed by the Max Design in 1998, *Anno 1602* shares DNA with the *Settlers* games, tasking players with colonising islands and slowly building up their economies. *Anno 1602* spawned many sequels, most recently *Anno 1800* in 2019, with Blue Byte taking over development of the later games.

CULTURES: DISCOVERY OF VINLAND

■ Funatics, the company cofounded by *Settlers II* director Thomas Häuser, released *Cultures* in 2000, and visually it's easy to spot the similarities with the *Settlers* series. The plot centres on a group of Vikings who are in search of the shards of a meteor with magical properties. The game was a big hit in Germany, spawning three sequels.

BANISHED

■ This 2014 city-builder from Shining Rock Software is like a more complicated version of the economic management system featured in *The Settlers*, but with combat removed. The player must build up a settlement by directing the citizens to farm, fish, chop wood and so on, while carefully optimising the economy.

▶ up," remembers Hertzler, "and *Settlers III* broke all records again."

Volker departed to form his own company before the release of *The Settlers IV*, and wouldn't return to the series he created for another 20 years (see '*The Settlers 2020*'). Meanwhile, Blue Byte was foundering after an attempt to float on the stock market just at the point when the dotcom bubble burst. "I got a phone call after spending a ton of money, I mean, six figures, many, many six figures, to get the company ready for an IPO," says Hertzler. "I had to spend all this money because you have to go back five years and redo your entire books. Then I got the call from the banks: 'Mr Hertzler, considering the current economic climate, blah, blah, blah, you'll probably want to hold off on the IPO.' And when the IPO didn't happen, I'd had enough."

Following this, Ubisoft bought Blue Byte in February 2001, resulting in some dramatic cutbacks. "They closed the US office," says Hertzler. "They closed the office in the UK. They kept the office in Germany because they were still working there on *The Settlers* and they had other plans for them. I had a one-year consulting contract with them in case anything would go horribly wrong and I could step in and help them out. Never got a call, never got a beep from them. So I started my pilot's licence, and that was it."

» [PC] Like *Heritage Of Kings*, *Rise Of An Empire* puts an emphasis on hero characters, but the game is much less combat-focused.

Hertzler spent the next ten years in aviation, running a fixed base operation in Phoenix, Arizona. After that, he formed the developer Stratotainment, working on a spiritual successor to *Battle Isle*, but wound this up after he couldn't find a publisher. Nowadays, he's working on a project called Mega 65, which aims to recreate the Commodore 65, a prototype successor to the C64 that was developed in the early Nineties but never released.

Ubisoft oversaw the release of *The Settlers IV* in early 2001, which was almost finished when it bought Blue Byte. The launch was marred by bugs which led to a series of patches, and reviewers again criticised its similarity to the previous game. Nevertheless, *The Settlers IV* did change things up with the introduction of the corruption-spreading Dark Tribe, with players using gardeners to restore blighted land. "It did really well for them," says Hertzler, "I mean, I'm pretty sure they made all their money back within a year so."

In 2004, Thomas Häuser's new game development company, Funatics, was brought in on a freelance contract to work on *The Settlers: Heritage Of Kings*, the fifth game in the series, when it was around halfway finished. "They had some issues working on *The Settlers V*, and we were asked to help them out," he says. But Häuser wasn't a big fan of the direction the series had taken since *The Settlers II*. "The clear definition of *Settlers* wasn't there anymore. With *Settlers* and *Settlers II* it was more economy-based and an indirect way of controlling stuff; *Settlers III* and *Settlers IV* were more of an RTS game. I gave a lot of feedback regarding the *Settlers V* game design, but it wasn't my job to work on the game design itself. You cannot question everything when you join a team." Häuser's company also helped out on the reboot of *The Settlers II* at around the same time (see 'Evolution Versus Tradition').

> "I gave a lot of feedback regarding the Settlers V game design, but it wasn't my job to work on the game design itself. You cannot question everything when you join a team"
> **THOMAS HÄUSER**

Heritage Of Kings moved further in the direction of real-time strategy, foregrounding combat and switching to 3D graphics. Again it received mixed reviews, with Kieron Gillen in particular criticising the stripped-back economics in his *Eurogamer* review, saying it's "not really much of a *Settlers* game at all". Whereas previously critics had marked down the series for not changing the formula, now they criticised it for changing too much.

This prompted a rethink for *The Settlers: Rise Of An Empire* in 2007. Combat was toned down, and the road network from the first two games was reinstated, but the relatively basic economic system raised the ire of reviewers, with Dan Whitehead at *Eurogamer* saying that it was "simplified to an almost insulting degree".

There was a sense that the *Settlers* series had lost touch with its roots, so Ubisoft changed course again for *The Settlers 7: Paths To A Kingdom* in 2010. The economics system was beefed up, and overall the game took more inspiration from *The Settlers II* than from later entries. The changes were received favourably, with *Eurogamer* calling it a "worthy continuation of the series", and *GamesRadar+* dubbing it "an extraordinarily thoughtful and attractive game".

But it could all have been very different. Thomas Hertzler says that if he had retained control of Blue Byte, he would have taken the series in a radical direction after *The Settlers IV*. "After *The Settlers IV*, I don't think I would have had the guts to do another one just like it, tweaking a little here, tweaking

NORTHGARD

■ In many ways a fantasy version of *The Settlers*, *Northgard* sees a clan of Vikings fighting against the likes of wyverns, kobolds, wolves and other clans, but perhaps the biggest threat is winter. Shiro Games released the game on PC in 2019, and it was recently ported to PS4, Xbox One and Switch.

CHAMPIONS OF ANTERIA

■ This hybrid RTS/action RPG game from 2016 was originally meant to be called *The Settlers: Kingdoms Of Anteria*, but Blue Byte decided to drop the *Settlers* naming and release it as a standalone game. Although it started off as a *Settlers* title, the resultant fantasy action game is far removed from the series' origins.

» [PC] *Rise Of An Empire* received an expansion called *The Eastern Realm* in 2008. Set in the Far East, it introduced a monsoon season that interrupts farming and fishing.

a little there. The next thing would have been a change of venue, basically, possibly more related to environmental issues, real-world issues, possibly colonisation of Mars. Basically, turn *The Settlers*' underlying structure into something that you could call an eco-game. And not in a mad 'tree-huggers' way, but showing how certain things work together. You pollute something here, something happens there – cause and effect – and what do you do?"

Hertzler already had a working title for what would have been the fifth game in the series: *Space Settlers*. "And I had been working on that for probably a year or so before it became clear that I would not be involved in the next *Settlers* game," he notes. "Because with *Settlers IV*, I figured we probably should stop. We should take it into another direction. I felt, use the success and now build something that is, instead of medieval, it's modern day and you have to manage a modern society and make sure that they kind of step over whatever's coming next. The next ten years, 15 years, 20 years are going to be critical. And that was the case 20 years ago, as it is today. Today possibly even more so." ★

The Settlers 2020

HOW THE SERIES IS RETURNING WITH AN AIM TO PLEASE OLD FANS AND NEWCOMERS ALIKE

The *Settlers* franchise has been mostly dormant since the release of *The Settlers 7: Paths To A Kingdom* in 2010. But to mark the 25th anniversary of the series in 2018, Ubisoft re-released the first seven games, as well as announced a brand-new entry, simply called '*The Settlers*'.

Volker Wertich, the designer of the original game and *The Settlers III*, has come back to direct the new title, which Ubisoft says "brings back the best, modernised elements from previous *The Settlers* titles, combining them with brand-new features and gameplay systems". Art director Edgar Bittencourt said in a video for fans that: "It's a stylised game, it's in the *Settlers* DNA, but this time we're going to go for full-power authenticity and believability. The characters will come in and work and will produce stuff, and you'll be able to see what they produce, their output and input piles, how things are running in the building."

One interesting aspect of the new game is how wild animals like boars, rabbits and deer fit into the ecosystem. Each animal will grow and eventually die, and each has a preferred habitat where they will breed more successfully. But boars are aggressive, eating crops and chasing after farmers, meaning you'll need to send hunters or soldiers to clear them out, while deer can provide leather as well as meat.

The latest title claims to have more buildings than any *Settlers* game before it, and there are also different ways to win, one of which is the 'Path To Glory'. For this, the player sets up a tournament, and sends a hero into the arena to face off against an opponent. Settlers from both sides gather at the arena to watch, and the audience gains a confidence boost if their hero wins, but loses confidence if their champion fails. Settlers with low confidence might become protestors and start a revolution against their leader. Thomas Häuser, director of *The Settlers II*, says he's pleased with how the game seems to be shaping up: "I'm looking forward for the next *Settlers* game, because I think they're moving in a good direction, moving back to some of the basic ideas." *The Settlers* was originally slated for release in autumn 2019, but last year it was delayed to a currently unspecified date in 2020.

Cannon Fodder

War has never been so much fun – and it had never been so small, until this miracle port came along

» **PLATFORM:** GAME BOY COLOR » **RELEASED:** 2000 » **DEVELOPER:** CODEMASTERS

When considering classic home computer games that might work well on the Game Boy Color, we feel like *Cannon Fodder* was perhaps not the most obvious choice. The game didn't shy away from the brutal reality of war, whether it was depicting a hillside gradually filling up with gravestones, or a soldier slowly bleeding to death from a fatal wound. It's not really the sort of thing the *Pokémon* kids would have been into – but then, with Nintendo's approval policies in place, that was never going to be what handheld gamers got.

Instead, Codemasters decided to pivot in a humorous direction, and in doing so added a number of features that the previous versions of *Cannon Fodder* didn't have, despite their more powerful host hardware. A brand-new FMV intro depicted an ill-fated game of catch played with a hand grenade, backed by the classic *War Has Never Been So Much Fun* theme, while the classic hillside was replaced with a 3D military base; in-game, soldiers got new *Worms*-style quips. With a younger audience on board, these changes made sense, but long-time fans might feel the tone of the original was lost.

Of course, while the conversion was as faithful as you could hope for, some compromises and gameplay adjustments were naturally made for the handheld format. The lack of birds flying overhead is a detail that might be missed, but it would hardly have been the most pressing issue for purists. The slightly faster pace of play, the two-troop squad limit and the new way that recruits parachute in to replace their fallen comrades all gave the game a slightly different, more action-oriented feel than the originals. It's a smart choice for the format, but maybe not for the most committed fans.

Although *Cannon Fodder* is a technical marvel for the Game Boy Color, the ready availability of other versions and the lack of word-of-mouth hype means that the game's price is currently reasonable – loose carts can go as low as £5, while a boxed copy in good condition will start from about £20. That's not a bad price for an interesting and impressive handheld take on a 16-bit classic, even if the spirit has changed a little. ✱

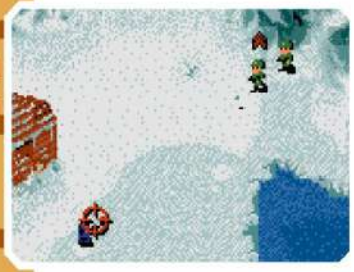
HOW IT PUSHED THE LIMITS...

Full Metal Video

We can't stress enough how impressive it is to see a prerendered intro video on the Game Boy Color. That's the kind of thing that's normally the preserve of machines with the benefit of CD-ROM storage.

War Song

Okay, it's a little bit scratchy because of the way it had to be crunched into Nintendo's handheld, but it's frankly amazing that Codemasters got the classic intro song *War Has Never Been So Much Fun* into the game.



Miniature Warfare

While the interface is a far cry from the original and some compromises were made, the action is very similar to the 16-bit versions and the mission maps will be instantly recognisable to fans of the originals, too.

Storage efficiency

All of this lavish presentation required a lot of space, and *Cannon Fodder* did use a 32-megabit cartridge. That might seem a huge amount for an 8-bit game, but it's actually no more than the likes of *Metal Gear Solid* used.

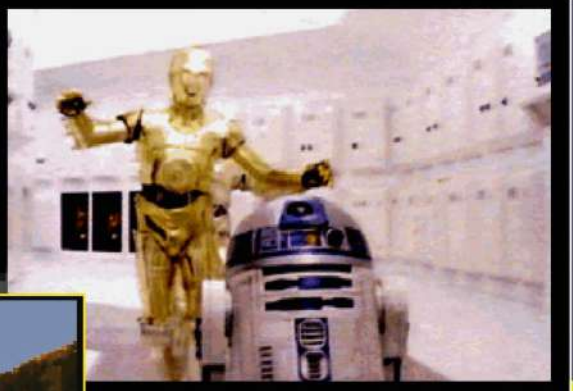
THE MAKING OF STAR WARS REBEL ASSAULT

NOT SO LONG AGO IN A PLACE NOT TOO FAR AWAY, THERE WAS NO BATTLEFRONT, NO X-WING VS TIE FIGHTER, NOT EVEN DARK FORCES OR JEDI KNIGHT. **RETRO GAMER** PEEKS INTO THE FORCES BEHIND THIS OFT-MALIGNED, YET INFLUENTIAL EARLY ENTRY INTO THE STAR WARS UNIVERSE

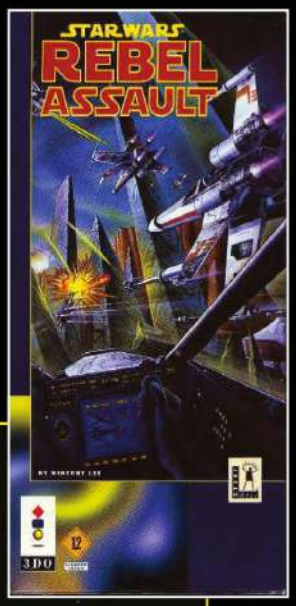
WORDS BY GRAEME MASON

"REBEL ASSAULT WAS NEVER EXPECTED TO MAKE ANY MONEY"

VINCE LEE



» Squeezing the game into the 3DO was an admirable effort.



» [PC] The beginning of the first level and an awkward flight through Tatooine's narrow canyons in a T-16.

» [PC] A cutscene from the end of the asteroid chase level. We all know what's going to happen to that TIE Fighter…

IN THE KNOW

- **» PUBLISHER:** LUCASARTS
- **» DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE
- **» RELEASED:** 1993
- **» PLATFORM:** PC, VARIOUS
- **» GENRE:** SPACE COMBAT SIM

Formed in 1982, Lucasfilm Games made its name in the mid-Eighties with 8-bit games such as *The Eidolon* and *Ballblazer*, before later in the decade beginning its successful line of adventure games, mainly based around the popular SCUMM engine. Unable to develop games based around its most famous IP, it wasn't until 1993 that the company (by now renamed LucasArts) finally released its first *Star Wars* title. Space combat sim *X-Wing* was a predictably huge hit, finally giving gamers and *Star Wars* fans the chance to jump into the cockpit of the famous starfighter and take on the mantle of a brave rebel pilot. Developed at a similar time was another game, one that was intended to reflect its more cinematic origins and take advantage of the emerging CD-ROM technology.

Rather than directly emulate the movies, the idea behind *Rebel Assault* was to generate a fresh story featuring new characters, yet take advantage of the film's memorable sequences and action scenes. The player took on the role of Rookie One, choosing either a female or male avatar, and battled through many levels similar to the original trilogy, yet also subtly different in many ways. Like Luke Skywalker, Rookie One grew up on Tatooine; unlike Luke, they are already in the academy and flying out of the rebel base at Anchorhead. Level one sees Rookie One navigating the tight canyons of their home planet in the triangular and fragile T-16 skyhopper; other levels include overhead shooting, first-person blasting and one third-person on-foot level.

Despite its scope, the development team of *Rebel Assault* was surprisingly small. The lead coder on the project was Vince Lee, who had been hired by LucasArts principally to work as a Commodore Amiga programmer. "My interest in computer games is what got me into programming," recalls Vince, "I remember learning BASIC to code a crude *Tron*-style light cycle game on a TRS-80 at school. Then I wrote a number of small arcade games in 8080 assembly language and sold my first game to a users' group for $350." While in college, Vince used his leftover scholarship money to purchase a Commodore Amiga. "I then learned C writing an *Asteroids* clone called *Stellaryx*. It was published, didn't sell many copies, but was a good experience." Unexcited by the range of jobs on offer having completed his degree in mechanical engineering, Vince applied to LucasArts to work on games instead.

Given the style of *Rebel Assault*, its 3D artists would be key, and the trio of Ron Lussier, Richard Green and Dan Colon formed the rest of the main team along with Justin Graham ▶

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

BALLBLAZER
SYSTEM: ATARI 8-BIT, VARIOUS
YEAR: 1984

THE EIDOLON
SYSTEM: ATARI 8-BIT, VARIOUS
YEAR: 1985

MANIAC MANSION (PICTURED)
SYSTEM: C64, VARIOUS
YEAR: 1987

» [PC] Attacking AT-ATs on Hoth in a snowspeeder.

▶ (installer/launcher coder) and Tamlynn Barra (voice director and producer). They worked on all four versions of the game (PC, Mac, 3DO and Sega CD/Mega-CD), although, as mentioned above, Vince's speciality was actually the Commodore Amiga. "On the Amiga I really enjoyed the Cinemaware games," he says, "and their games effectively combined game sequences with movie-like cutscenes. I was also a fan of the *Star Wars* vector graphic games and fairly early on it was clear that *Rebel Assault* was going to end up as a game that combined elements from the two." As the Commodore computer never officially came with a CD-ROM drive, the game was never considered for the Amiga, despite Vince's expertise. Yet while he was a fan of the classic games, Vince wasn't exactly a diehard follower of the films themselves.

"Anybody who knew me at the time probably remembers me as a big science and engineering nerd," he laughs. "And as such I was very interested in science fiction, but hadn't yet learned to appreciate the more 'casual' relationship with technology that *Star Wars* and similar movies have." Regarding them as 'science fantasy', it wasn't until Vince began working at LucasArts that he built an appreciation for the franchise's iconic characters and rich human themes such as temptation and redemption that serve to underpin the futuristic action. From a management view, *Rebel Assault* had two requirements: that it was based on *Star Wars* and that it used the CD-ROM format. "It had some convoluted origins as a demo for CD-ROM-based hardware," says Vince, "but that was it." Perhaps more surprising was that a relatively inexperienced, if talented, programmer such as Vince was allowed to take control of the project. "*Rebel Assault* was never expected to make any money, which I suppose is why I was in charge of it. At the time LucasArts was still mainly known for its adventure games."

LucasArts management may have only handed down two edicts to *Rebel Assault*'s development team, yet even as the project lingered in its early stages, these caused major headaches. The CD-ROM technology of the time was struggling to adapt to the imagination of coders, as Vince explains. "In those days most PCs had almost no memory and fairly feeble processing power. So if you wanted complex moving imagery, it had to be pregenerated and streamed off the CD in real time. This style of game became known as 'rails' and only really works well when travelling in some kind of vehicle, as

MANAGING NEW TECH

LUCASARTS' FORMER MANAGER OF NEW TECHNOLOGY, TOSHIYASU 'TOSHI' MORITA ANSWERS OUR QUESTIONS ON REBEL ASSAULT

WHAT DID YOU THINK OF *REBEL ASSAULT*'S CONCEPT?
I thought it was fresh and interesting. Most of the 3D games were rendered at runtime but *Rebel Assault* was rendered at development time, so it was possible to have more detail, although this suffered a bit when reduced down to 1x CD-ROM speed.

WAS IT ALWAYS INTENDED TO USE NEWER TECHNOLOGY?
Yes. Vince was a big Amiga fanatic and used 3D rendering software on it. One day, he brought in a 3D-rendered trench run, and this became the concept. I think there was some discussion of shipping on floppy discs, but it wasn't serious.

WAS THERE A WORRY THAT WOULD LIMIT ITS MARKET?
There were some concerns. However, after the game shipped, LucasArts was approached by a bunch of CD-ROM manufacturers who wanted to bundle *Rebel Assault* with their drives because it actually required a CD-ROM to play. I heard there were several million units of the game sold because of this bundling.

THE SEGA CD/MEGA-CD DID STRUGGLE A BIT WITH THE GAME...
The Sega CD processor was fairly slow when compared to even a lower end PC of that era, which would typically have a 80386 processor running at 33MHz which could do about four to eight MIPS [million instructions per second] in good conditions. The Sega CD had two processors which, when combined, could execute about two MIPS, so there's a difference of about 4:1 in processor performance. Plus other issues such as the memory buses and bitmap data conversion...

WERE ANY ALTERNATIVE STYLES DISCUSSED DURING DEVELOPMENT?
I think there was some early discussion about rendering the polygons in software, but most of us knew we could not fill half the screen with software-rendered polygons at a playable framerate, so the idea was quickly dropped. At the time, IBM PC video cards supported 2D acceleration but not 3D, so hardware polygon rendering was not an option.

that justifies why the player doesn't have any real freedom of movement." The issue this then presented was the fact that much of the *Star Wars* movies takes place outside of vehicles. An exact recreation of the trilogy was going to be extremely tricky.

"Most of the *Star Wars* movies involve long sequences of characters talking, arguing, flirting, lightsaber fighting and I-am-your-fathering," smiles Vince. "It became pretty clear early on that trying to shoehorn one or more of the *Star Wars* movies as-is into *Rebel Assault* would have made a really annoying game." The only possible solution would have been the action segments punctuated by multiple cutscenes; but even back in 1992, Vince realised how potentially damaging this could be. "I'm always the first one to skip past long dramatic cutscenes in games. They interrupt the experience and usually come across as more melodramatic than dramatic. If we'd stuck to the movies, the cutscenes would have been longer than the game. And besides, we didn't have the budget for it." The solution was to create new characters and plot from scratch while incorporating themes and vehicles from the famous saga, with the new storyline dovetailing to a certain degree to the plot of the movies.

Beginning on Tatooine, Rookie One is a former farmhand and a rebel pilot in training. After a brief T-16 skyhopper practice flight through the desert planet's labyrinthine canyons, the rebel base at Anchorhead is attacked by the Imperials. Rookie One's training is put on hold as the rebels take to the space above Tatooine and attack the Star Destroyer threatening the planet. After an asteroid field chase and AT-AT attack, both modelled on *Star Wars*' sequel, *The Empire Strikes Back*, there's an on-foot section followed by a brace of incongruous A-wing missions. Then ultimately, the hero takes part in the assault on the first Death Star – the fate of the rebellion is placed firmly in your hands.

"I DECIDED THAT MAKING A FUN GAME WAS MORE IMPORTANT THAN STAYING TRUE TO THE STAR WARS CANON"
VINCE LEE

"I decided that making a fun game was more important than staying true to the *Star Wars* canon," says Vince, an eye-opening statement given how guarded George Lucas could be over his creation. "And departing from the characters and story let us do just that." The movies had a limited number of action sequences that lent themselves to the rails-style shooter. "And we were able to borrow the most suitable of them for *Rebel Assault*: flying a T-16 skyhopper, dogfighting with TIEs in an X-wing, dodging asteroids, taking down walkers, blowing up the Death Star, and so on." Fortunately, Vince already had experience working on this type of game, despite the rails gameplay not existing meaningfully at the time.

"I'd done some contract work in college adding features to a terrain generation program named Vista for the Amiga," says Vince. "One feature it had was the ability to generate a sequence of images that played back as a flyover animation, similar to the genesis effect from *Star Trek II*. So when the idea of creating a CD-ROM experience arose, I began experimenting with compressing the image sequences to see if I could get them small enough to stream comfortably off the first generation of CD-ROM drives." Vince was trailblazing; at the time, the only other notable CD games were *Myst* and *The 7th Guest*. Neither had attempted to weld arcade-style action to their complex images.

But it was a tortuous process. Digitising and playing back full-frame video simply wasn't possible with the tech of the early Nineties. "The scenes were actually built from individual frame grabs," says Vince, "hand-cut into pieces, touched up, reassembled and animated manually. It was very labour-intensive and required a lot of trickery." Ron Lussier led the 3D art team, and with no established procedure in place, his team was flying by the seat of its pants. "We had countless challenges," recalls Vince painfully. "For example, CD drives were very primitive at the time, and CD burners were rare and expensive. Not many programmers will relate today, but when *Rebel Assault* was written, multitasking wasn't available yet. Because of this, the whole game ran off a CPU interrupt to work around the limitations in the CD-ROM drives and drivers. And while creating the game, the company didn't even own a CD burner – we had to send copies of the game on hard drives to an external company every time we needed to burn a CD for testing."

» [PC] *Rebel Assault* managed to craft its own story without too much concern for its place in the *Star Wars* universe.

[PC] Having despatched an AT-AT, Rookie One crashes on Hoth and endures a painful on-foot level.

» [PC] In one of the better levels, Rookie One must take down a Star Destroyer while fending off TIE fighter attacks.

▶ Nevertheless, development of *Rebel Assault* proceeded relatively uneventfully, with no one seemingly caring enough about the project to dictate terms to the team. "There might have been a few artistic disagreements here and there," recalls Vince, "but nobody really cared enough about the project prior to release to worry about it too much." 3D models were used and animated in the 3D studio, while the only original footage filmed was a sequence in which a group of LucasArts employees were dressed as pilots for one of the game's few cutscenes. However, Vince's struggles against PC technology paled into insignificance against the 3DO and, in particular, the Sega CD, or Mega-CD in Europe. Fans of the oft-maligned Mega Drive add-on may wish to look away now.

"Unfortunately, the Sega CD was a horrible console," grimaces Vince. "It was basically a 16-bit Sega Genesis console with a CD-ROM drive tacked-on. Its display system was still tile-based, and designed for *Mario*-style games, not raster images. I don't believe it even had enough memory to display a full-screen image at more than 4-bit colour." The console couldn't even manage all the levels; a stage that saw Rookie One take on Imperial probe droids on Hoth was excised from the Sega CD version. "And remember," continues Vince, "that Windows 95 wouldn't come out for another two years, and Windows 3 was not a viable choice for games. We had no alternative to MS-DOS, although we did use a DOS extender to exceed the 640K memory limit."

CAST OF MANY

MOST OF THE CHARACTERS IN REBEL ASSAULT HAVE A MINI-BIOGRAPHY IN THE GAME'S MANUAL. HERE'S A QUICK RESUME OF THEIR ROLES

CAPTAIN MERRICK SIMMS

■ The leader of Blue Squadron, Simms was promoted to captain after an acclaimed victory at Dantooine. He's a skilled pilot who always keeps his cool. Simms leads the first trench run against the Death Star but fails.

COMMANDER JAKE FARRELL

■ A veteran of the Republic, Farrell even trained some of the pilots in the Imperial fleet. Upon retirement, he joined the Rebel Alliance and assumes the Han Solo role at the end of Rookie One's Death Star trench run.

COMMANDER RU MARLEEN

■ The youngest commander in the alliance, Marleen trains pilots for battle. Her skill at discerning the most talented fliers makes her a valued asset, and she takes on the Wedge Antilles role in the final Death Star battle.

An element that was part of every iteration of *Rebel Assault*, and something that hugely endeared the game to the press and public alike, was its music. From beginning to end, this was the first *Star Wars* game to feature the famous and soul-stirring original score by composer John Williams. "It was the first game from LucasArts to include a digitised soundtrack," notes Vince, "though by today's standards, at a horribly low 11K sampling rate." Like most developers, all of LucasArts' previous games had been on the standard floppy disk format. Due to space restrictions, these used MIDI-based systems which resulted in an electronically beepy sound on the sound cards of the time. "I actually coded an early version of the opening to *Rebel Assault* with MIDI sound and I hated it!" Vince continues. "Fortunately, I had a sound digitiser on my Amiga, and experiments with it led to the streaming sound system eventually used in the game." While far from perfect, *Rebel Assault*'s use of the iconic music helped gloss over some of the gameplay issues players experienced.

» [PC] A lone redshirt navigates the corridors of an occupied Enterprise – watch out for those armoured Borg soldiers!

***Rebel Assault* was not expected to do well; the team delivered the game on time, despite the challenges of the Sega CD version.** "The original lifetime forecast [for sales] was 15,000 units," recalls Vince, "and that was later raised to 25,000, and then again to 50,000 shortly before release, mainly after the feedback from preview showings started coming in. And if my memory serves, the initial run of 100,000 or so units sold out within the first three days, which no one expected." Critical reception of *Rebel Assault* was not so clear-cut. While the public had been starved of *Star Wars*-themed games and were wowed by the then-impressive graphics on display, journalists were more cautious of the new style of gameplay that *Rebel Assault* employed, as well as some of the technical restrictions – clumsy controls, grainy and indistinct graphics and a lack of influence over movement. Vince accepts the game's criticisms with grace.

"Sure, everything could have been done better in retrospect," he smiles, "but given the numerous constraints the team operated under, there's nothing I think we could have done better at the time. I think we were fortunate as well that the game hit at just the right time, occupying a narrow window between 2D and true 3D games, before technology could make the latter possible. I don't think it's had any lasting effect on the industry as a whole, but it does amuse me sometimes to think of the copycat rails games that came out afterwards that tried to ride the same wave." For Vince personally, the experience of both *Rebel Assault* and its superior sequel, *The Hidden Empire*, (for which he had a similar role), were life-changing. "They are still some of my fondest memories, not just of the games themselves, but also being at a company with so many wildly creative and interesting people. The success I found there gave me the confidence to start and run my Palm Software company, and in turn led to my current career in iOS and Android development."

Rebel Assault is undoubtedly flawed, especially from the perspective of 27 years later, but its key role in the development of not only *Star Wars* games but gaming's inexorable transition from the pixelated efforts of the Eighties and early Nineties to the full-blown cinematic experiences of today can never be overstated. ★

DARTH VADER

■ The Sith Lord plots against the Rebel Alliance in several cutscenes and is the only character from the movies to make a significant appearance. Seriously, you don't actually need us to tell you who Darth Vader is, do you?

ROOKIE ONE

■ Originally an inhabitant of Tatooine, Rookie One has joined the rebels and is a student of both the Force and the rebel flight training school. The character is a like-for-like replacement for Luke Skywalker.

ROOKIE THURLOW HARRIS

■ A rebel captain's son, Harris has spent most of his life in his father's shadow. Harris takes on the Biggs Darklighter role in the attack on the Death Star, with a similar demise. That planet-destroying weapon is really quite dangerous.

TURLAND HACK

■ A close friend of Rookie One, Turland Hack is a communications officer at the rebels' Anchorhead base. He is killed fairly early on in the game when the base gets destroyed by those ruthless Imperial forces.

California Games

A REAL TIME-WASTER

» RETROREVIVAL

» ATARI LYNX » 1989 » EPYX

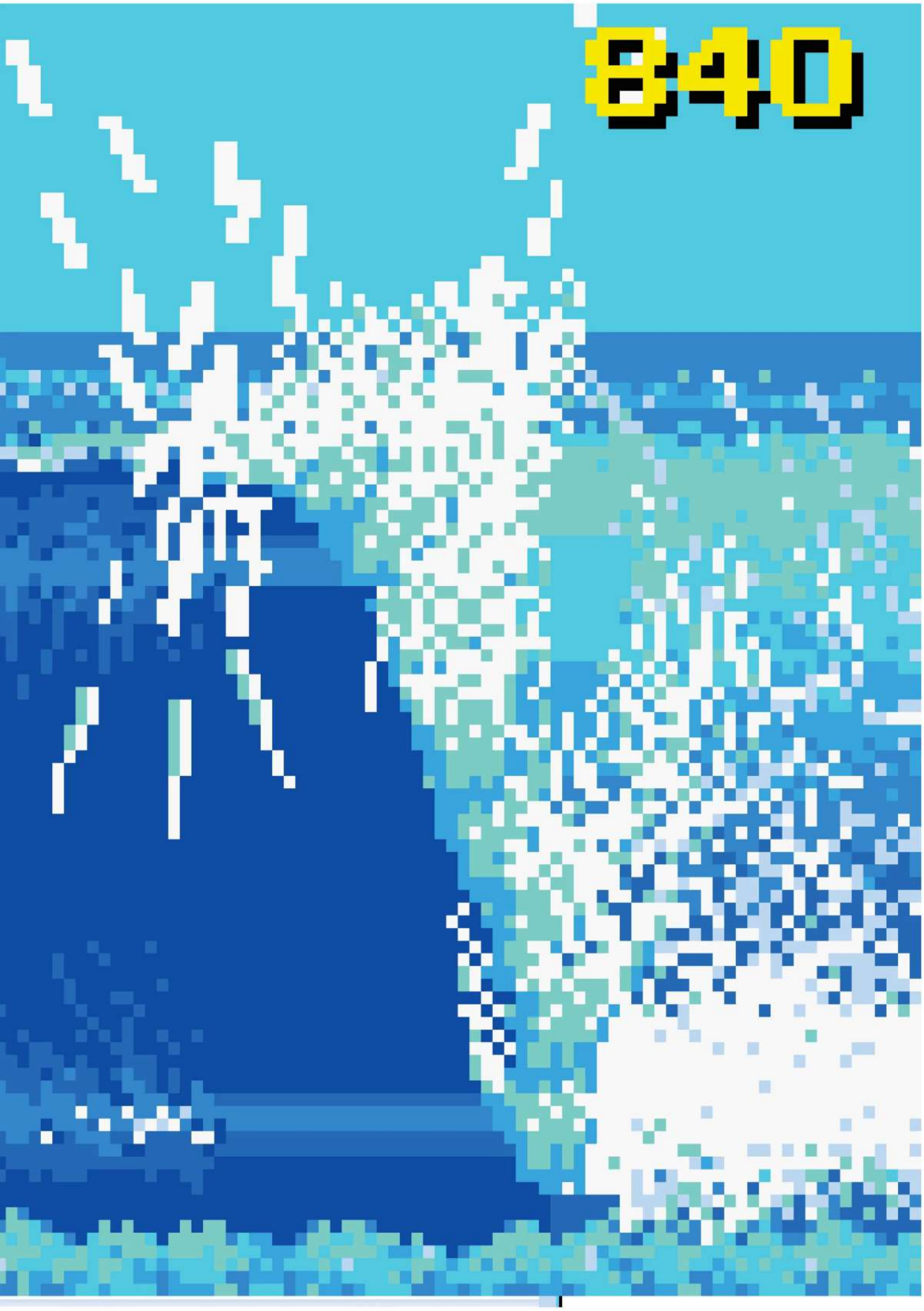
You have to feel sorry for Atari's Lynx. It was an absolute powerhouse of a handheld on release, but ultimately it just couldn't compete with the sheer popularity of Nintendo's Game Boy. While I currently no longer own a Lynx – I foolishly sold my collection and current prices mean it's not worth starting all over again – I still have a huge soft spot for the system and I'm always tempted to buy another one.

We actually have a beat-up Atari Lynx in the **Retro Gamer** office that's still going strong. Granted, the screen is scratched and there's no battery cover, meaning you have to tape batteries in or use a charger, but it does work and it gives us the opportunity to play the one game we actually still have for it: *California Games*.

Although Epyx's game was a couple of years old when it helped launch Atari's new console, it still worked brilliantly as a pack-in title. While it only included four events compared to earlier versions, each one – surfing, footbag, BMX and half-pipe – were great fun to play and often highlighted the technical prowess of Atari's new handheld. Everything from the spinning logo in the game's introduction, to the awesome noise that accompanied the skater's 'zoom' in the half-pipe event and the bikini-clad girl that skated by during intermissions screamed, "Look at me!" and it easily helped justify my purchase from my Aunty's Littlewoods catalogue.

My favourite event will always be the surfing, however, and it's largely due to two things. It was absolutely ridiculous fun in multiplayer (I knew two other people with Lynxes and we were rarely able to all get together) and it was excellent for high score chasing. In fact, during the Stuart Hunt/Steve Williams era of the magazine, we regularly held competitions each lunchtime which would occasionally spill into the afternoon. We all got so good that we eclipsed the records that were on Twin Galaxies at the time, but we never bothered submitting them.

What a shame I couldn't use this opportunity now to show off the amazing quadruple spins we were able to pull off. I guess you'll just have to take my word for it. ✱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SO YOU WANT TO COLLECT...

FUTURISTIC RACING GAMES

Often defined by unusual vehicle types, high speed and powerful weaponry, futuristic racers are a great subgenre. There's something for everyone here, from bargain basement curiosities to forgotten classics, so strap in and fire up the thrusters

Words by Nick Thorpe

EUROSTAR

WIPEOUT 3 SPECIAL EDITION

EXPECT TO PAY £25+ (EUROPE)

DEVELOPER: PSYGNOSIS LEEDS
RELEASE: 2000

Nostalgia might fool you into thinking that *WipEout 2097* was the PlayStation peak of the series, but that's largely because this PAL-only gem rarely gets its due. The third game in the series never seemed to attract the same attention as the first two, so the release of this revised and expanded version late in the console's heyday came as quite a surprise. It was launched with little fanfare and with players already looking towards the launch of the PS2, it ended up being somewhat overlooked. It's all a bit tragic.

This version is rather more expensive than the original release, due to its desirability and PAL-only status. £25 is the going rate for a complete copy, but prices vary widely – we've seen it go for as high as £50 and as low as £12. If you fancy saving some money, the game was released in a double pack with *Destruction Derby 2* late in the PlayStation's life. While the plain white disc lacks the appealing The Designers Republic branding, you can pick it up for £10-£20 complete and get another great game as part of the deal.

» [PlayStation] All of the tracks from the standard version are present, including favourites like Mega Mall.

» [PlayStation] Many of the older courses benefit from slight visual updates, with new textures and reworked scenery.

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

The key reasons to choose Special Edition over the original

Classic tracks

The biggest draw of the game is its inclusion of eight extra tracks – three from *WipEout* and five from *2097*. This essentially doubles the content over the standard release, and makes the game a greatest hits compilation.

Extra bonuses

The regular version of the game features four sparsely decorated 'prototype' tracks, but the Japanese release added two more featuring ultra-fast ships. Those two tracks have been added to *Special Edition*, too.

Revised gameplay

Special Edition features enhanced physics, a slight rebalancing of vehicle stats and better visibility inside tunnels, as well as weapon pads that show when they're inactive. There are also bug fixes for AI racers.

Essential tweaks

There are plenty of small improvements that add up. The game auto-loads your save when it boots, the link cable multiplayer option is no longer hidden behind a cheat and menu navigation has been improved.

CHEAP THRILLS

XGIII: EXTREME G RACING

EXPECT TO PAY £1+ (PS2/GC EUROPE)

EXPECT TO PAY £5+ (GC JAPAN)

EXPECT TO PAY £6+ (PS2/GC USA)

DEVELOPER: ACCLAIM STUDIOS CHELTENHAM
RELEASE: 2001

■ If you're looking for a great collection starter, Acclaim's futuristic bike racer is a great choice. The game was well-received back when it was released, praised as a competent if somewhat uninventive sequel that did a good job of transitioning the series from the previous generation. No matter which version you're looking to acquire, it's a cheap game these days – though there's a bit of variation out there. It's easier to find the PS2 versions at rock-bottom prices, as the GameCube market tends to be one where prices are generally higher. The Japanese versions are rather less common than the other two on both platforms, so while neither are particularly highly sought after, you'll probably need to search a little harder for them.

» [GameCube] Everything whizzes by at a tremendous speed – one lapse of concentration and you're toast.

» [GameCube] Normally, avoiding getting up close and personal with your fellow racers is the best plan.

TWO WHEELS GOOD

MACH RIDER

EXPECT TO PAY £25+ (EUROPE)

EXPECT TO PAY £35+ (USA)

DEVELOPER: NINTENDO
RELEASE: 1985

■ When you mention futuristic racing to most players, the first Nintendo game to come to mind won't be *Mach Rider*. However, this NES game is plenty of fun, incorporating a variety of modes that allow you to focus on racing, combat or a mix of the two. The game is also a great example of why you might choose to focus on various different regions in your collection. If your goal is to make your money go as far as possible, you'll want to look at the brilliantly cheap Japanese version. However, if you're the kind of collector that loves variants, you'll want to take a look at the PAL releases. These include the 'European version', the 'Spanish version' and the 'Mattel version', all with different box art incorporating elements of the Japanese and American designs.

» [NES] If enemies block your path, just shoot them out of the way.

EXPECT TO PAY £5+ (JAPAN)

» [NES] Cornering is hard with all of these obstacles to contend with.

WHO NEEDS A RETRO FUTURE?

OUTRUN 2019

EXPECT TO PAY £13+ (EUROPE)

EXPECT TO PAY £35+ (JAPAN)

DEVELOPER: SIMS
RELEASE: 1993

■ Does this Mega Drive game even count as a futuristic racer any more, given that it now takes place in the past? Maybe not, but it doesn't matter. The game doesn't offer the types of beautiful scenery that you would normally expect from an *OutRun* game – see the box out below for more details on why that is – but it does offer the forked roads of the original and speed boosts like *Turbo OutRun*, as well as new features like overpasses. For some reason, when we tracked eBay prices for this game, the auctions were considerably lower than Buy It Now prices, so we'd advise you to wait and look for a bargain if you're going down that route. The Japanese version is rather more expensive than the others, as is to be expected due to the Mega Drive's relative lack of popularity in the country.

EXPECT TO PAY £15+ (USA)

» [Mega Drive] Turbo is activated once you've accelerated for long enough without a collision.

» [Mega Drive] Overpasses! Roads in the sky! Truly fake 2019 is a magical, wondrous future time – better than the real one that's for sure.

» [Mega Drive] You clearly can't see it here, but the sense of speed in *OutRun 2019* is truly sensational, Darran really regrets selling off his Japanese copy.

BUT IS IT OUTRUN?

The strange saga of OutRun 2019's development

If you've ever felt that this game doesn't feel like part of the *OutRun* series, your instincts are pretty good because for almost all of its development, it wasn't one. It started life as a Mega-CD racer called *Cyber Road*, but by May 1992 it had been moved over to the Mega Drive and renamed *Junker's High*. A prototype under this name exists, which is close to the final game and even has the ability to save data. The battery backup was removed prior to its release, presumably in order to save money, and the game was renamed for its March 1993 release.

COLLECTING TIPS!

Have the hardware
■ If you're looking to maximise your opportunities for bargains, you'll want a wide range of systems, and the ability to switch between regions as needed.

Slow down
■ Futuristic racers encourage you to live fast, but Buy It Now prices rarely offer value. Wait for auctions, or hunt for alternative places to shop.

Check compatibility
■ When you're looking to run older PC games, it's worth checking compatibility, and you should also familiarise yourself with software like DOSbox.

Yes to Yahoo
■ Learning to use Yahoo Auctions Japan can pay off if you're after Japanese versions of games – some of the prices are amazingly low, even after shipping.

WHEN YOU WISH UPON...

EXPECT TO PAY £7+ (JAPAN)

UCHUU RACE: ASTRO GO! GO!

DEVELOPER: KAZE
RELEASE: 1994

■ This Japan-exclusive SNES game has a lot of appealing points, particularly when it comes to the visuals. It's incredibly stylish, from the cartoonish box art and character portraits, to the in-game track graphics, and the use of Mode 7 to represent those tracks ties the game very specifically to the early Nineties. Despite the fact that it's an accessible import game, and the planned US release *Freeway Flyboys* was cancelled, it's also not an amazingly expensive game. While boxed prices can climb a good way above the bottom end we've quoted, based on condition, if you're willing to tolerate a loose cart you can get it for well under £5.

» [SNES] *Astro Go! Go!* features a variety of fun obstacles like jumps and conveyor belts.

» [SNES] The way the craft moves independently of the camera is unusual.

MEET THE RACERS

The five pilots that battle to be the space ace

Jet

The pilot of the Blue One is the all-rounder, with average stats for pretty much everything, with only top speed standing out as better than the norm.

Love

Careful drivers are likely to pick Love and her Lunabee. It's average for acceleration and top speed, but its handling is good and it's great at braking.

EO

Robotic pilot EO's Gyrotype 2 feels like the Barivehicle's less crazy cousin – it's fast and heavy, but its handling isn't quite as atrocious.

Baribroon

This guy is clearly the bully of the pack. His Barivehicle has poor acceleration and handling and its braking is below average, but it's heavy and has a high top speed.

Flyhigh

Agility is the name of the game for Flyhigh and the Cooljam – it's got average speed but incredible handling and acceleration, with good brakes, too.

F, THAT'S FAST

F-ZERO GX

EXPECT TO PAY £10+ (JAPAN)

DEVELOPER: AMUSEMENT VISION
RELEASE: 2003

■ This legendary collaboration between Nintendo and Sega is one of the finest games of its kind, combining astonishing speed, fantastic handling and course design, and visuals that are still attractive the better part of two decades later. It's not a hard game to find but it is one that is constantly in demand due to its quality, as well as the continued love for the *F-Zero* series. That demand, combined with the relatively expensive nature of GameCube games, ensures that the price is higher than you might expect – although it's possible to pick up PAL copies for £20-£25, we've seen it go as high as £50. You can typically save a little money by going for the Player's Choice budget label version, but even this can go high. You might like the Japanese version if you're looking to save a little money, but it's worth noting that the PAL version does run at 60Hz.

EXPECT TO PAY £20+ (EUROPE)

» [GameCube] Despite all the detail, *F-Zero GX* runs at a smooth 60 frames per second.

FUNKY FLYER

SLIPSTREAM 5000

EXPECT TO PAY £1+ (EUROPE)

DEVELOPER: GREMLIN
RELEASE: 1995

■ While many futuristic racers tie you to roads, Gremlin's PC racer puts you in an aircraft, giving you an extra dimension to worry about – and that's on top of the fact that your rivals are out to blast you with lasers. There are plenty of editions of this game to choose from. Early big box releases come in CD-ROM or 3.5-inch floppy disk versions and are designed for DOS, with certain American packs including a free two-track *Skid Row* sampler CD. The game made plenty of budget label appearances too, under labels like Sold Out, Zoo Classics, Uwish Games, and Grab It, and these advertise compatibility up to Windows XP. For this reason, it's considerably easier to get CD-ROM versions. Of course, if you're worried about compatibility issues, there are always the digital releases on Steam and GOG – but you can't put those on a shelf to look pretty, can you?

» [PC] Gremlin's futuristic racer isn't expensive, so pick it up if you fancy some cheap thrills.

MORE GAMES TO CONSIDER

F-ZERO X

DEVELOPER: NINTENDO EAD
RELEASED: 1998
EXPECT TO PAY:
£13+ (EUROPE) **£35+** (USA) **£5+** (JAPAN)

QUANTUM REDSHIFT

DEVELOPER: CURLY MONSTERS
RELEASED: 2002
EXPECT TO PAY:
£1+ (EUROPE) **£3+** (USA) **£10+** (JAPAN)

TUBE SLIDER

DEVELOPER: NDCUBE
RELEASED: 2003
EXPECT TO PAY:
£40+ (US)

F-ZERO CLIMAX

DEVELOPER: SUZAK
RELEASED: 2004
EXPECT TO PAY:
£135+ (JAPAN)

FIREBUGS

DEVELOPER: ATTENTION TO DETAIL
RELEASED: 2002
EXPECT TO PAY:
£2.50+ (EUROPE)

BOARD MEETING

TRICKSTYLE

EXPECT TO PAY £2+ (PC EUROPE)

EXPECT TO PAY £5+ (PC)

EXPECT TO PAY £4+ (DC USA)

DEVELOPER: CRITERION GAMES
RELEASE: 1999

■ Way back before *Burnout*, Criterion fused extreme sports and futuristic racing in this hoverboarding game. Rather than just scoring points, the tricks you could pull off are essential to a successful race, whether you're flipping the board to gain extra height on your jumps or laying back in a luge position to ride energy rails. It can be a little rough around the edges, but it's good fun. As one of the more popular games in the early days of the Dreamcast, this is an easy pick-up, with both the PAL and US versions selling cheaply. The PC version is less common, but it's not too expensive either – European budget label copies are very cheap, and even sealed big box copies originating from the US can be had for under £20.

MASTER PILOTS ONLY

POWERDROME

EXPECT TO PAY £8+ (ATARI ST)

EXPECT TO PAY £9+ (AMIGA)

DEVELOPER: MICHAEL POWELL
RELEASE: 1988

■ This early 3D polygonal racer is pretty obscure these days, but it's one of the more influential games in the futuristic racing canon – Nick Burcombe cited it alongside *F-Zero* and *Super Mario Kart* as influences on the development of *WipEout*. Although *Powerdrome* leans more towards flight than hovering, with a tricky control system to match, the tilting viewpoint is very reminiscent of how *WipEout*'s first-person view looks. Both the Atari ST and Amiga versions are in reasonable supply and go for affordable prices – the Atari version edges slightly cheaper – but the PC DOS version is less common and more expensive as a result. If you're looking for that version, don't get it confused with the 2004 remake, which appeared on PC as well as PS2 and Xbox. If it's not on floppy disks, it's the wrong one.

EXPECT TO PAY £25+ (PC)

» [Amiga] It might look a little basic nowadays, but *Powerdrome* still manages to deliver the thrills and at a decent price, too.

POCKET POWER

DROME RACERS

EXPECT TO PAY £35+ (EUROPE)

EXPECT TO PAY £35+ (USA)

DEVELOPER: MOBIUS ENTERTAINMENT
RELEASE: 1993

■ While versions of this Lego licensed game were released for PS2, GameCube and PC, the one we're focusing on here is the separate and rather impressive Game Boy Advance version. Many developers attempted to pull off 3D games on Nintendo's 32-bit handheld, but without dedicated polygon-pushing hardware to fall back on, most of them turned out poorly. This one wisely stuck to untextured shapes, helping to make it fast, responsive and visually clear. As usual with cardboard boxed games, you'll pay a premium for a complete copy, but the game is somewhat uncommon and sells for a good price in any condition as a result. As always, remember that Game Boy Advance games are commonly counterfeited and you should contact the seller in advance if you have any doubts about authenticity.

» [Game Boy Advance] The visuals are more than a little reminiscent of *Virtua Racing*, which is fine by us.

» [Game Boy Advance] The handling takes a little getting used to, but once you manage that the game is great fun.

RACE DISCIPLINES

What can you do in Drome Racers?

Road races

These are your standard races, taking place in cities, on dedicated tracks and the like. If you're just starting out, try these races first.

Off-road races

This category covers a lot of ground, from icy climes to barren deserts. Make sure you pick your car appropriately for the terrain you're covering.

Drag racing

Racing in a straight line is trickier than you might expect – timing your gear shifts and nitro boosts correctly is key. These races take place in first-person.

F-ZERO

DEVELOPER: NINTENDO EAD
RELEASED: 1990
EXPECT TO PAY:
£10+ (EUROPE) **£20+** (US) **£4+** (JAPAN)

ROLLCAGE STAGE II

DEVELOPER: ATTENTION TO DETAIL
RELEASED: 2000
EXPECT TO PAY:
£9+ (PS EUROPE) **£4+** (PS US) **£20+** (PC)

ROCK 'N ROLL RACING

DEVELOPER: SILICON & SYNAPSE
RELEASED: 1993
EXPECT TO PAY:
£40+ (SNES EU/USA) **£30+** (MD EU/USA)

STAR WARS EPISODE I: RACER

DEVELOPER: LUCASARTS
RELEASED: 1999
EXPECT TO PAY:
£15+ (N64) **£20+** (DC EU) **£28+** (DC USA)

WIPEOUT PULSE

DEVELOPER: SONY STUDIO LIVERPOOL
RELEASED: 2007
EXPECT TO PAY:
£3+ (PSP EU) **£4+** (PSP US) **£20+** (PS2 EU)

CLASSIC MOMENTS

Tekken 3

» **PLATFORM:** PLAYSTATION » **RELEASED:** 1998 » **DEVELOPER:** NAMCO

You've always enjoyed the lighter side of fighting games – you always finished off your *Mortal Kombat II* victories with a Friendship and quickly developed a soft spot for comedy fighter Dan in the *Street Fighter Alpha* games. *Tekken 2* certainly had its moments, what with Roger, Alex and Kuma, but they all felt a bit too sincere and viable. Going into *Tekken 3*, you couldn't help but expect more of the same.

You were wrong. As soon as you unlocked Tekken Ball, you knew that Namco had decided to embrace absurdity to its fullest extent. The concept was simple – attack the ball to either make your opponent miss it, or hit them hard in the chops. But the execution was glorious. There you were, a heavily muscled man in a jaguar mask, fighting a tiny farting dinosaur in some sort of weirdly violent volleyball game. Next time you had people over for a games night, there was no question of what you were showing them – after all, who wouldn't want to see that? ✱

BIO

Having established *Tekken* as the PlayStation's premier 3D fighting series with its first two games, Namco knew that the home version of the third game needed to be special. While it was a slight graphical downgrade from the arcade original, the PlayStation version of *Tekken 3* was still an audiovisual treat, making most games on the platform look rather dated. Better yet, the developers decided to add some new characters and a variety of new modes, giving it considerable additional depth. Critical acclaim and sales success followed, but the *Tekken* series moved on to the PlayStation 2 after this instalment.

MORE CLASSIC TEKKEN 3 MOMENTS

Bounce Pogo Pogo Pogo

Namco decided to crank Yoshimitsu's ridiculousness up to 11 in *Tekken 3*. The masked ninja suddenly became a lightsaber-wielding cyborg, with crazy helicopter moves. But better than that was when you discovered his pogo attack – hopping around on the sword suddenly become the best way to finish a fight.

Deadly Force

There aren't many titles that bolt a full game from a similar genre on to the main experience as an unlockable, but *Tekken 3* did just that with Tekken Force mode. This offering turned the game into a scrolling beat-'em-up, and allowed you to take on goons in an attempt to unlock Doctor Bosconovitch.

Ogre Battle

If you play well and make your way right to Ogre, you'll know that he certainly looks and feels like a final boss. But suddenly, after winning the first round, a short cutscene begins – Ogre decides to steal Heihachi's powers to reveal his true form, transforming mid-fight in a way that no previous *Tekken* boss had.

Going Full Buttons

Eddy Gordo is the button masher's dream. Hit the kick buttons and waggle the d-pad about a bit, and he'll do all sorts of amazing flippy moves. Once you knew this, there was only one correct course of action – use Eddy to batter your mate who thought he was a fighting game master, just to put him in a really bad mood.

THE MAKING OF MONSTER HUNTER

As Capcom entered the brave new world of online gaming, the company's unusual spin on the MMO would eventually become one its greatest successes. Kaname Fujioka tells us how his team began a series that laid the groundwork for connecting hunters together

WORDS BY ALAN WEN

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** CAPCOM
- **DEVELOPER:** CAPCOM PRODUCTION STUDIO 1
- **RELEASED:** 2004
- **PLATFORM:** PS2
- **GENRE:** ACTION RPG

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

RED EARTH (PICTURED)
SYSTEM: ARCADE
YEAR: 1996

DARKSTALKERS 3
SYSTEM: ARCADE
YEAR: 1997

JOJO'S VENTURE
SYSTEM: ARCADE
YEAR: 1998

At the turn of the millennium, console online gaming was the industry's new wild frontier. Sega had blazed the trail with the Dreamcast, albeit with mixed results, no less due to the console's own short lifespan. But with the PS2 at the peak of its popularity, Capcom embarked on a three-pronged strategy to embrace online gaming. "Each game had a different concept of how to utilise online connectivity: the racing game *Auto Modellista*, the horror spin-off *Resident Evil: Outbreak* and, finally, the multiplayer action game *Monster Hunter*," explains Kaname Fujioka, who would go on to direct the latter. "So the series really came about from our early efforts to develop games in the nascent online space."

Fujioka had joined Capcom in its arcade heyday when *Street Fighter II* was the king. As a character animator and motion designer, he cut his teeth in the company's arcade division on titles like the *Darkstalkers* series before leading on character creation for lesser-known arcade-only release *Red Earth*. So an online-specific game, one set in a vast 3D world of roaming beasts, was a huge departure, which he would be the first to admit.

"We were beginners when it came to online games, so we took inspiration from any and every online title we could," he says. "The first step was in understanding the difference in how online games such as multiplayer online games and MMORPGs were structured compared to ordinary offline games. We researched titles like *Final Fantasy XI*, *Diablo*, *Ultima Online* and *Phantasy Star Online*."

While he mostly cites MMORPGs, *Monster Hunter* was a different kind of beast. First and foremost, and true to its deceptively simple title, it's a game about hunting monsters as you work your way up the food chain to take on the most gargantuan apex predators that could send most players packing with just a swipe of their claws or a swing of their tails. There was no levelling system, rather your hunter's strength grew based on the armour you were able to craft from the carcasses of creatures you felled. Hunts themselves were also not structured as dungeons but rather across vast arena environments teeming with flora and fauna that felt like its own ecosystem. Perhaps most unusual for a developer known for making games with big hit bars, there's no way of seeing how much health a monster had; you instead had to read their behaviour, like when a gravely wounded Gendrome starts limping back to its lair.

» [PS2] Minegarde was the town dedicated to online multiplayer. It could host up to eight players and had its own market, armoury and tavern.

» [PS2] Small monsters are rarely a threat, but the agility of Velociprey do make for good target practice.

Kaname Fujioka

From 2D character animator to director of Capcom's biggest selling IP of all time, Kaname Fujioka has come a long way.

It's perhaps no surprise that Fujioka's background meant that animations played a vital part in the feel of *Monster Hunter*, which also set it apart from more fast-paced hack-and-slash action games. Players instead learned to understand and respect animation frames, whether it's the swing of a weapon, the time taken to neck a potion, or a monster attack that knocks you back or sends you flying. All of this sought to immerse the player in a grounded realism seen in few games at the time – certainly not in MMORPGs reliant on menu commands, cooldown timers and mouse clicks. "All of the different styles of online games that we were looking at had their pros and cons," Fujioka explains. "So I think that the biggest challenge in designing *Monster Hunter* was in understanding the possibilities and restrictions that came about from each concept."

It was neither a stats-heavy RPG nor a hack-and-slasher you could mash away at, which would be a surefire way to get yourself killed. Of course, button-mashing was out of the question for more bizarre reasons: instead of face buttons, *Monster Hunter* mapped its attack inputs to the PS2 controller's right analog stick. Incidentally, controlling the camera came from the d-pad, meaning that players who wanted to move both their character and the camera at the same time developed an awkward hand technique infamously coined 'the claw'.

As baffling as the control scheme sounds now, using the right stick for camera movement was far from the default option at the time, apart from in FPS games. In fact, this era saw Capcom taking many experimental approaches to navigating 3D environments, as demonstrated in *Resident Evil 4* and *God Hand*. "On PS2, we pursued the concept of a combat control system which felt analogue and responsive, leading to the unique style of using the right analogue stick to swing your weapon," explains Fujioka as he also justifies that subsequent entries also attempted to leverage the hardware's key features into input, such as swinging the Wii remote in *Monster Hunter Tri* or using the 3DS touchscreen.

Analog swing aside, *Monster Hunter*'s other features ▶

SLAYING THROUGH THE AGES

While Monster Hunter has evolved over time, its most charming elements have been there from the beginning. Here are some of our favourites

▶ There's nothing like keeping your stamina up by cooking some good old meat. Learning to roast a well-done steak with a portable spit is, in fact, your first task as you time the results to a delightful ditty. Looks tasty!

▶ Gestures weren't just included for players to communicate with each other, some even have secret effects. For instance, wave at a hot air balloon and it reveals the location of the monster on the minimap.

▶ Evading monster attacks can be tough, but if you dodge while running away from a monster, the hunter performs an epic dive that grants a brief window of invincibility. It's no wonder hunters coined this manoeuvre the 'Superman'.

▶ The friendliest fauna are the Felynes, adorable bipedal cat companions who assist hunters, from cooking meals to carting them back to camp after a hunt gone south. From *Monster Hunter Freedom Unite* onwards, they also joined the fray as AI-controlled fighters.

▶ The first game was re-released and expanded in Japan as *Monster Hunter G*, adding new monsters or new subspecies of existing ones. More importantly, for the most dedicated hunters, it was the chance to unlock G rank, the most elusive club home to the most challenging and rewarding hunts.

nonetheless would remain part of its core DNA that made it unique to any other kind of online multiplayer game. Its structure also came down to working around hardware limitations, such as how these huge hunting arenas had to be broken up into smaller zones separated with loading screens. Indeed, everything, from split single-player and multiplayer modes to quests, fragmented into more digestible chunks. "We were ultimately able to arrive at our own unique version of what *Monster Hunter* was", says Fujioka. "That fundamental understanding of what concepts were viable and how they meshed with our intentions was key."

Then, of course, there's the star attractions themselves, the monsters. From the harmless herbivore Aptonoth you slay for meat to the stone-armoured flying fortress that is Gravios, *Monster Hunter* contains about two dozen types of monsters. Although there's a rather 'Jurassic' flavour to a few of them, they also cover a distinct breadth of species that fit in each of the game's regions of varying climate and terrain.

"Since the hunters are basically avatars of the player, it was much more important that the monsters be more strongly and uniquely characterised," explains Fujioka, "The monsters are designed so that their unique aspects come across easily in their silhouette and colouration. I think that approach is partly why many monsters have been so memorable and beloved to players over the years."

Incidentally, Fujioka tells us his favourite monster from the first game is the Rathian, the flying wyvern and her poisonous tail that is essentially the other half of the title cover star, Rathalos. "Rathian was the first large monster designed for the game and that process became a blueprint for subsequent large monsters. It's just a really challenging but fun monster to hunt!"

Yet it was also important for the game to maintain a structure of progression, as series producer Ryozo Tsujimoto explained in a 2014 interview with *Kotaku*: "You don't want a very powerful-looking enemy right at the beginning because it would be silly to be able to defeat him really easily, so earlier on we [wanted a]ant sort of a comical element, so that you're not fighting an endless succession of really powerful-looking monsters early on."

» [PS2] Attacking Diablos head-on is either brave or stupid. At least wait for your fellow hunters to catch up.

» [PS2] The minimap may be overly intrusive but it's vital for tracking the monster's location once it's on the run… provided you hit it with a Paintball already.

» [PS2] Hunts aren't especially gratuitous in gore, although with the Great Sword, it's actually possible to dismember certain small monsters.

» [PS2] Even if hardware restrictions necessitated in breaking up the map, *Monster Hunter*'s environments were some of the most breathtaking at the time.

Your first few quests centre on gathering supplies as you learn to craft useful items like meat and potions. Your first real hunt sees you slaying a pack of mostly annoying Velociprey before you graduate to face the larger Velocidrome, still ultimately small fry compared to the later wyverns. Progress is a slow methodical approach requiring patience not unlike the bespoke animations, but it eases in the player from fledgling hunter to a fearless master over monsters.

Ultimately, the real magic came from joining forces with other players online. Suddenly with four hunters laying into the thick hide of a Diablos, the odds don't seem quite so impossible, as one keeps it busy while another knocked down and close to fainting can catch their breath to heal or resharpen their blade.

While communication was limited unless players had a keyboard peripheral, *Monster Hunter* included the ability to use gestures – a feature now widespread in all online games – the game's 'prance' remaining its most charming and unique. According to Fujioka, this was a late addition during development. "For time reasons, most of them are based on the motion designers doing their own motion capture performance and directly putting that recording into the game. I think that's what gave them a nice degree of looseness!"

The online element was certainly the major positive given to *Monster Hunter* by its harsher critics when it released in 2004, arriving the following year in Europe. While reception was mixed overall, with *Game Informer* describing its control scheme as "horrific", *Edge* scored it 8/10, praising it as "an excellent exercise in humility and cooperation, and one that should not be passed by".

It was Capcom's best online game for the PS2 by default, mostly because both its earlier efforts *Auto Modellista* and *Resident Evil Outbreak* arrived in Europe stripped of that USP. Even then, the lack of widespread broadband connectivity meant few were able to fully appreciate the experience as intended. What ultimately turned the game's fortunes around from being a curio slipping into obsolescence was a change of platform, when the game's previously Japan-only expanded re-release was ported to the PSP in 2005, released in the West as *Monster Hunter Freedom*.

"A portable system like the PSP lets people use ad-hoc local networking to experience that great multiplayer action together," explains Fujioka. "Being able to get across to people what was so

CEPHADROME

▶A break from the dinosaur and dragon designs, the Cephadrome is a peculiar beast that swims beneath the desert sand (a sand shark!?). Prone to paralysing hunters with its dorsal fin, it's also quick to 'swim' away when threatened.

KHEZU

▶This nightmarish monstrosity doesn't have a head, just a large mouth protruding from its long neck. Cave dwellers by nature, the species' rubbery hide keeps it warm, while suction pad-like feet enable it to cling to walls.

> "SINCE THE HUNTERS ARE BASICALLY AVATARS OF THE PLAYER, IT WAS MUCH MORE IMPORTANT THAT THE MONSTERS BE MORE STRONGLY AND UNIQUELY CHARACTERISED"
> **Kaname Fujioka**

THE BEST-IARY

THE FIRST GENERATION'S MOST FEARSOME MONSTERS

DIABLOS

▶Technically a flying wyvern, this big lug prefers to stay on the ground – all the better to hit like a truck with its ginormous horns. Its size also doesn't stop it from burrowing underground for a sneak attack.

RATHALOS

▶The most iconic monster of the series, there's a reason this terrible wyvern is known as the 'King Of The Skies'. Even on terra firma, you've still got to contend with its fiery breath and poisonous claws.

KIRIN

▶A legendary Elder Dragon more akin to a unicorn charged with thunder. Kirin may not be huge, but its frightening speed and devastating lightning attacks, which also harden its hide, makes it one of the series' most elusively difficult monsters.

great about *Monster Hunter* this way was a huge boost to the series."

This success, which later continued on the Nintendo 3DS, however, was largely in Japan where portable gaming was much more commonplace with its younger player base in the playground or on the train. Nonetheless, subsequent entries would continue iterating on the series' compelling formula that when the series finally got the attention of the rest of the world jaded by the modern monetising machinations of big budget games, it was like a breath of fresh air.

While *Monster Hunter: World* is finally able to take advantage of current-gen technology to easily connect players into seamless hunting environments as well as streamlining some of the series' more archaic quirks, its core DNA of capturing the thrill of the hunt has remained intact. Now serving as the series executive director, even Fujioka can't quite believe how life-changing the series has been for him, not just because it's now only behind *Resident Evil* as Capcom's best-selling franchise of all time.

"Compared to my days as a designer, when I would immerse myself in my work so much that I barely got outside for fresh air, being a part of *Monster Hunter* has given me the chance to step out and come into contact with all kinds of people," he says. "The experiences I've had through the series have enabled me to see things from varied points of view, for which I'll be forever grateful."

Although the original *Monster Hunter* feels like a fossil that will remain unknown to the series' millions of new fans, it's incredible how much its spirit hasn't been lost in subsequent generations, which still tap into the joy of cooperation and triumphing in the most formidable hunts. That's worth a prance. ✱

» [PS2] Rathalos may seem invincible once airborne but a well-timed Flash Bomb is one way to knock it out of the sky.

Hardware Heaven

iQue Player

» **MANUFACTURER:** iQue/Nintendo » **YEAR:** 2003
» **COST:** 498 Yuan (launch), £280 (today, boxed), £200 (today, unboxed)

The Chinese market has always been a tough one for console manufacturers to try to break into, thanks to heavy government regulations and rather loose enforcement of intellectual property rights. To try to solve this, iQue was founded by Nintendo and Dr Wei Yen – an executive who had been involved in the development of the Nintendo 64 and GameCube at Silicon Graphics Inc, MIPS Technologies and ArtX. The company's flagship product was the iQue Player, a full N64 wholly contained in a control pad. TV connections, power and media plugged into the controller, while multiplayer was achieved with an external box.

Unlike the N64, the iQue Player didn't accept dedicated single-game cartridges. Instead, games had to be written to a proprietary memory card at in-store 'iQue Depot' stations, reminiscent of Japan's Famicom Disk Writer and Nintendo Power kiosks. This move was intended to tackle piracy, but it wasn't long before an alternative was developed – the iQue@Home program, which allowed Windows PC owners to connect their player by USB and download new games. Unfortunately, software support never truly got going. Five games were available at launch and five more were released within the first year, but only four more were released after that – the last being *Animal Crossing* in 2006. ★

ESSENTIAL GAME
Sin & Punishment

If you find yourself in the rather lucky position of owning an iQue Player, it's fair to say that you're probably looking for single-player games for it, as the chances of you finding another owner and the appropriate hardware for multiplayer games is slim indeed. You probably want something that isn't too linguistically heavy either, given that the games are all in Chinese. Fortunately, *Sin & Punishment* is a spectacular shoot-'em-up, with minimal language requirements and a superfluous multiplayer mode. Now all you have to do is find a way to get it, as iQue servers and iQue Depots are long gone.

iQue Player fact

■ iQue would go on to distribute Nintendo's handhelds in China, in much more recognisable forms, before Nintendo partnered with Tencent for the Chinese launch of the Switch in 2019.

PROCESSOR: 64-BIT MIPS R4300I CPU (140.625 MHZ)

RAM: 16MB DDR RAM (8MB USABLE)

GRAPHICS: REALITY COPROCESSOR CUSTOM GPU (62.5MHZ)

AUDIO: 16-24X SOFTWARE DRIVEN 16-BIT PCM CHANNELS

STORAGE: REWRITABLE 64MB NAND FLASH MEMORY CARD

OPERATING SYSTEM: CUSTOM UPGRADABLE IQUE OS

SYSTEM SUPPLIED BY **EVAN AMOS**

CHRIS CANNON

He was right at the heart of the early Liverpool software scene when the city was at the centre of the whole computer games revolution. Prepare for some manic tales from Chris

Words by Paul Drury

Chris Cannon seems to know everyone. We first met him at Play Expo Manchester in May 2019, where we were hosting an event to mark the 35th anniversary of the release of *Jet Set Willy*. As we chatted with Chris about his early coding on the TRS-80 and Oric, his time at Bug-Byte and Software Projects and his lasting friendship with the Odin Computer Graphics boys, it became clear his story was intertwined with the beginnings of the software industry in Liverpool and so many of the people who made it happen – including, of course, Matthew Smith. "It was great to see Matthew again at the show last year in Manchester," he grins. "I loved that. And someone even asked for my autograph, which hasn't happened for over 30 years!"

Photo by Marc Wilding

The eyes of the world were on Liverpool in the Sixties thanks to The Beatles but when you were growing up there in the Seventies and Eighties, did it feel like it was on the decline?
Massively. It was a bit of a shithole, to be honest. It was dirty, rundown, loads of empty shops, lots of deprivation... The people were great, though, and there were plenty of them that looked beyond that, in music and in computers.

Did the emerging world of home computers offer you a way out?
I was really into electronics, a proper geeky kid, and must have been unbearable. I used to buy components from the Tandy shop in Bootle, where I lived. It was in the Strand shopping centre, made infamous years later because of the Jamie Bulger murder. One day in the summer holidays, 1979 I think, I went in and there was this computer there, a TRS-80. I did the usual thing of typing in 'Hello Chris' and it just felt special, having this machine you could command. I stayed there all day. The manager did know me and said I could come back tomorrow... as long as I brought my mum in to check it was okay. I was only 12 years old! I spent all summer in the shop and eventually ended up getting a job there.

So you learned to program on the TRS-80?
Yeah, I used to go to the Computer Centre in Liverpool. It was just a cordoned off area in the back of a shop in St John's Precinct where kids a bit older than me would be playing around on their computers. I got talking to them and they told me about the TRS-80 User Group, which sounded like a great idea. We'd meet at the back of the shop on a Saturday afternoon and I learned a lot from them about programming in Assembly language. Then one day this kid called Matthew Smith came along.

Ah the man who would go on to write *Manic Miner* and *Jet Set Willy*. What was your first impression of him?
Arsehole. Absolute arsehole. He was the big 'I am'. We'd be showing stuff we'd done and he'd be like, 'Now look what *I've* done. I've sold *my* game.' But when you got to know him, he was alright. He was a nice guy, really. He was very introverted and insular so when he came across with this bravado, it was all show.

Computer shops seem-– more than just retail outlets back then. They seem to have acted as hubs for coders to meet and make plans.
What made them so special was that the management didn't throw us out. They allowed a bunch of like-minded kids to hang about. I'd sometimes go to Bruce Everiss' shop, MicroDigital, on Brunswick Street and got to know Mark Butler and Eugene Evans who worked there.

Mark Butler went on to set up Imagine Software, and in the documentary *Commercial Breaks*, he comes over as a bit of a wideboy...
Mark was a lovely bloke, but think about it. He's just out of his teens and he's effectively become a millionaire. Of course he's going to be up himself.

Eugene Evans would become the poster boy for Imagine, as the archetypal teenage 'whizz kid' programmer, making a fortune from writing games.
I love Eugene. He was a very clever lad. I remember he used to wear this T-shirt which said, 'I'm bilingual. I speak BASIC and Pascal.' He was more into the 6502 side of things and we were the Z80 gang, so that made them the scummy ones. I'm sure they thought the same about us.

> I told her my careers teacher I was going to program computer games and she said it was a flash in the pan and would be over in two years
>
> Chris Cannon

> I feel a special attachment to Matthew Smith. All the trouble he got into kind of boiled down to me
> Chris Cannon

» Chris in 1985 – selfies the old-fashioned way...

Eugene initially worked for Bug-Byte before he joined Imagine. Is that how you ended up there?
I hadn't spoken to Eugene for maybe six months but he must have had my phone number from MicroDigital days. He rang me and said he was working for a company called Bug-Byte who were publishing games and they'd just got a prerelease version of a new machine called the Colour Genie, based on the TRS-80. He said if he got me one, could I write something for it? I thought, 'Why not?'

Did you manage to write something for the new machine?
My assembler skills weren't brilliant so I thought I'd do something in BASIC, which I could do quickly. I loved puzzle games and adventure games, so I made a Tower Of Hanoi game in a few days and then did a very simple text adventure with just half a dozen rooms and a couple of puzzles to crack and a few pretty graphics. Alan Maton, one of the managers at Bug-Byte, sent them off to the Colour Genie people and they ended up putting them on a demo cassette that came with the computer when it was properly released.

Result! Did you get paid?
I got £300, which in 1982 was a small fortune for a 15-year-old from a poor background. The Oric had just come out and Bug-Byte gave me one to keep. Alan said I ought to expand on the text adventure I'd written. That's what became *The Castle*.

Was the game a big step up from that demo?
Oh yeah. I mean unlike most adventures back then, every object had a weight and you could only carry so much. I even stuck scales in the game so you could weigh stuff and work out what you could take with you at one time. I put in lots more rooms, more logic, more puzzles and took it to Bug-Byte. They said it was good but too easy. Adventure games back then... if you took a wrong turn, you were dead! So I went back and made it much more difficult.

Have you a favourite puzzle from the game?
Yes. At one point, you have to climb out of this cavern and a buzzard swoops down, grabs you by the head and decapitates you. If you search around, you find this decapitated head and if you hold that up, the buzzards grabs it and carries you out.

***The Castle* also came out on the Spectrum...**
[Laughs] I really didn't fancy typing it all in again. I had a mate who'd just got a Spectrum and wanted to learn to program so I gave him the printout from the Oric and said typing it all in would be a great way to learn! I did pay him £50, too. I added in a bit of machine code and made everything work on the Spectrum... and it got good reviews and was pretty successful.

Did you earn much from your first officially released game?
I was getting 30p per sale and I got a £630 advance on delivery and for the first production run. Then I got paid another £300 three months later so they must have sold over 3,000 copies. I was 16 and just sitting my O-levels and had to see the careers teacher, Mrs Fuller. I told her I was going to program computer games on the Spectrum. 'That's a flash in the pan,' she said. 'It'll be over it two years.' Yeah, well done Mrs Fuller. I left school after my last exam, walked to the Bug-Byte offices in the Albany Building and started there full-time.

What was your role at Bug-Byte?
I realised I didn't actually like writing games but I was good at knowing what would sell. Games would be sent in and after a few minutes of playing them, I'd know if they were marketable or if we could make some changes to improve them.

CHRIS' CANON

Five games to play that Chris had a hand in

THE CASTLE

■ Originally coded by Chris for the Oric-1, this text adventure follows a familiar format, as you find yourself seeking treasure and then escaping from a fortress full of lethal hazards. The humour and sweet touches, including some unlikely Morse Code, help ease the brutal deaths you suffer on a regular basis.

TWIN KINGDOM VALLEY

■ A groundbreaking adventure, not just because of the pretty graphics and sprawling setting, but due to the independence and intelligence of the many NPCs which wandered the game world. You weren't the only one scrapping and stealing in the valleys, which in 1983 was quite an achievement.

MANIC MINER

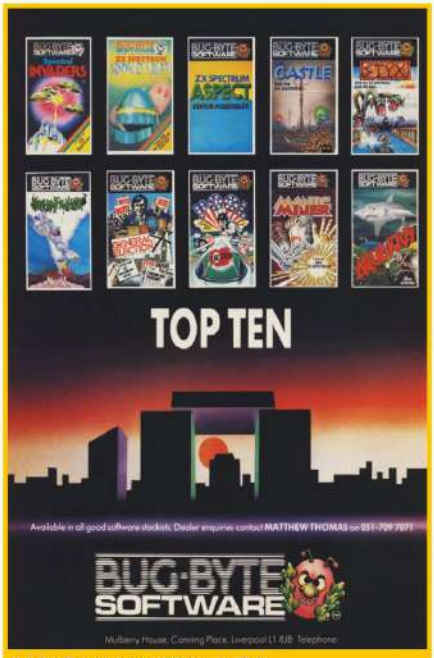
■ The game that gave us Miner Willy and introduced us to the mercurial Matthew Smith. Chris introduced Matthew to Bug-Byte, the game's original publisher, and also contributed ideas during development. He is especially proud of the stepladder monsters, inspired by his dad's DIY skills.

THRUSTA

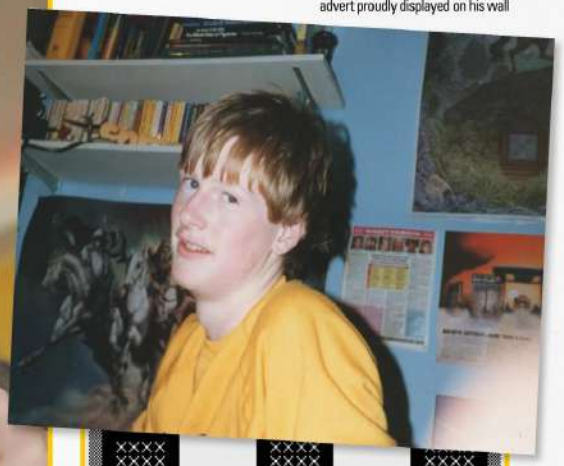
■ One of the games Chris reviewed during the tail-end of his time at Bug-Byte and decided it was worth sneakily passing on to his soon-to-be employer Software Projects to release. Crush monsters with rocks, blast baddies with your laser and struggle with the slightly awkward controls.

JUMPING JACK

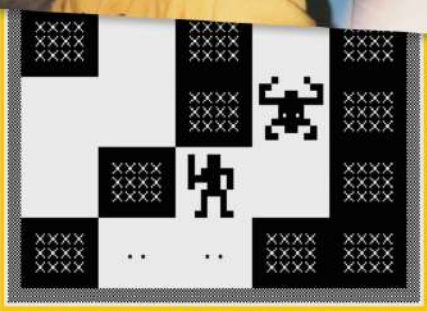
■ A cheeky inclusion here as Chris' connection to the game is that he turned it down for publication by Bug-Byte. You can sympathise, as at first glance it looks crude and repetitive, but play for a while and its addictive charms are revealed. See Martyn Carroll's excellent piece in **RG 146** for the full story.



» A Bug-Byte advert from 1983, featuring Chris' *The Castle*, plus a pair from Matthew Smith.



» Chris in his bedroom, 1983, with *The Castle* magazine advert proudly displayed on his wall



» [ZX81] Bug-Byte published some fine games in the very early days of home micros, including this cracking adventure by Don Priestly.

CAPS
At the far end of the room, an old wizard appears - he seems less than pleased to see you.
"Welcome, Adventurer", he hisses. "Let me tell you the rules of my castle.
For your nerve in entering my domain I condemn you to remain here forever, unless you can gather the six treasures I have hidden and put them all in a certain room.
I won't tell you which room - that would be too easy - but if you succeed then I shall let you escape with the greatest prize of all - your life!
I won't give you any help in your quest, but my pet demon might - if it suits him."
The wizard leaves through a doorway which slowly fades away, leaving no trace.
To start, hit <S> for sound else <N>

» [Oric-1] Six treasures and then escape. Easy.

Bug-Byte were getting 20 or 30 games submitted some days and most of them were useless and went straight in the bin but some were excellent.

Any you can recall being impressed by?
Twin Kingdom Valley. What was good about that game was the NPCs in it. I'd put NPCs in *The Castle* and they had a bit of intelligence but they didn't move around. In Trevor's [Hall – coder of *Twin Kingdom Valley*], they could wander around and affect the gameplay. I do remember making one mistake, too. *Jumping Jack* for the Spectrum was sent in and I said it was rubbish. I just didn't play it long enough to realise how addictive it was. We wrote to the author to say no and he replied saying he'd had a better offer from Imagine anyway!

Bug-Byte also published Matthew Smith's first Spectrum games. Was that down to you?
Yeah, I introduced him to Bug-Byte and that's why I feel a special attachment to Matthew. I feel all the trouble he got into kind of boiled down to me. I was friends with him by then and thought he was a really nice guy. I'd go to his house in Liscard and he was fascinated that I'd managed to con two computers out of Bug-Byte [giggles]. I told Tony Milner [cofounder of Bug-Byte] I had this mate who was a really good programmer. I showed him some games Matthew had done for the TRS-80 and this code he'd written that let you talk into a microphone and it would play it back using the buzzer in the tape port so the computer seemed to speak. That blew Tony away.

We assume Tony wanted to meet this budding programmer, then?
Matthew came to the Bug-Byte offices, dressed in the dungarees he always wore. A right scruffy bugger, he was. I introduced him to Tony and Eugene [Evans], who knew of him already. They gave him a Speccy to see what he could come up with. Matthew asked how long he had and Tony said as long as he needed. He was back three weeks later with *Styx*. He wanted to do *Defender* but couldn't get scrolling working on the Spectrum so that's why the shots look like that [in the game]. Tony was well impressed and released it… and it did quite well.

At what point did you become aware that Matthew was working on *Manic Miner*?
The 48K Spectrum came along and I knew Matthew's favourite game on the Atari 800 was Bill Hogue's *Miner 2049er* so it wasn't a surprise when he started his version of that. I remember going to his house while he was writing *Manic Miner* and he had a big print out of the code on dot matrix sheets. He had them all over the carpet, trying to find this bug in the code. We went into the kitchen to get a coffee and when we came back, the cat had shat on it and then clawed it all to ribbons. He went mental.

Did you have any input into any of the levels of *Manic Miner*?
Matthew got a lot of inspiration from stuff around him, like the snapping toilets are from when his little brother had a toilet seat fall on him and said the toilet had bit him. So yeah, we'd bounce around ideas for different creatures… my dad was decorating the hall at that time so I suggested sticking ladders in and they became the 'stepladder' monsters in The Warehouse level. There was no professionalism to it, just two mates having a laugh over the phone. In fact, we even exchanged graphics over the phone…

In 1983? What do you mean?
Matthew lived over the water on the Wirral and I was in Bootle and he wanted to show me

ARE YOU ELITE?

When we met him at Play Expo Manchester 2019 during the Q&A session with Matthew Smith, Chris proudly declared he was the first to achieve the ranking of 'Elite' in the BBC Micro version of the seminal space-trading opus. Exactly how long did that achievement take, Chris? "I was working at the PCW show and bought it off their stand the day it was released. I was addicted straight away. I played it every waking minute and I wouldn't even switch the BBC Micro off, to save on loading times. I'm pretty sure I was the first to get the official acknowledgement from the publisher of reaching 'Elite'. And you never lose your status," he laughs.

YOU ASK THE QUESTIONS

Readers can get involved at www.retrogamer.net/forum

MERMAN: Did you playtest each other's games and give honest feedback?

Yes. I especially remember *The Master*. Dave McGee, the programmer, and the artist, John Robinson, were my mates. The game was originally based on *Blade Runner* and it looked great but the gameplay... I just told them it was shite. They knew they would get an honest opinion out of me.

RORY MILNE: What attracted you to the TRS-80, as a gamer and a coder, and could the Colour Genie have ever been a contender?

Good questions! I was interested in electronics and the TRS-80 was the next step up. Everyone sees the ZX81 and the Spectrum as the groundbreaking machines but they were cheap and that's what made them popular, but as far as I'm concerned, the TRS-80 was the first useable computer. It had a proper keyboard and a proper BASIC interpreter. You could sit down with it and it just worked. As for the Color Genie, no. It was very expensive and we'd moved on by the time it came out. Even though it was technically advanced, it was like Betamax when the Spectrum was VHS.

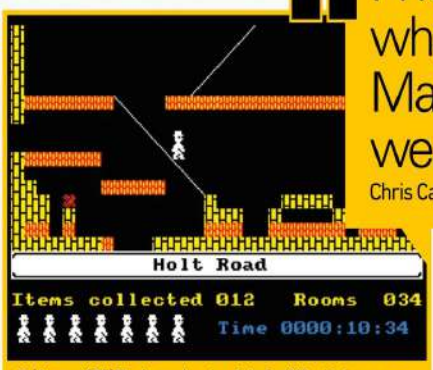
CRUSTY STARFISH: Would you ever program games on retro systems?

No, I hate them. All I really want to do with any retro computer is put a nail through it. I know people love the retro scene but I've been there and got the T-shirt and it's worn out in the wash.

PSJ3809: Do you miss the Eighties and the rise of home computers?

I miss the Eighties – the camaraderie and the music scene. I don't miss the games industry, to be honest.

> "I was at Matthew's house when the cat shat on his Manic Miner printout. He went mental"
> Chris Cannon



» [Amstrad CPC] The Amstrad version of *Jet Set Willy* added many new screens, including this nod to Holt Road, where the boys would spend more time drinking than coding...

The Warehouse screen. I suggested wiring the tape leads direct to the phone microphone and speakers. He'd save and I'd load [on the Spectrum]... and it worked! Illegally, I might add. We were pumping five volts into the phone lines.

Ingenious! *Manic Miner* was a huge critical success but then Matthew had a serious falling out with the Bug-Byte bosses. What is your view on what happened?

I didn't know everything at the time but I do remember Matthew came in to our open-plan office – my desk was in the corner – and I saw him talking to Tony Milner. It was getting quite heated and Matthew ended up storming out. Tony had a face like thunder and wouldn't talk to anyone for the rest of the day. I rang Matthew up that night but he didn't want to talk about it. In fact, he went into a funk and wouldn't talk about it for ages.

This led to Matthew setting up Software Projects with Alan Maton, a former Bug-Byte employee, and Tommy Barton, an investor. Were you not tempted to go with them?

Well, Alan did ask if I wanted to come and join them. I hadn't been paid any royalties by Bug-Byte for my game for over a year. Not a penny and I'd been asking all the time so that peeved me off. So I started redirecting any games that had been sent to Bug-Byte for consideration to Software Projects if I thought they were any good...

Sounds very crafty! Any games you can recall 'redirecting'?

Thrusta I remember was one. It did well for Software Projects, though I played it again the other day and it's rubbish [laughs].

We assume you got caught in the end?

I got called in by Tony and he said he'd heard I'd be meeting up with Alan Maton. I said, 'So, what's wrong with that?' He said, 'I followed you and saw what you were doing.' I was out on my ear... but I rang Alan up and said something like, 'Come on, it's payback time now,' and I started at Software Projects the next day. This would be late 1983.

What was your role there?

I had three roles really. I did the PR, so talking to magazines and doing a bit of marketing. Then I dealt with games sent it by people, either inviting them in to see us if the game was brilliant or letting them down gently. And then I'd go to the zoo.

Sorry, 'the zoo'?

Yeah, that was Unit 7 of the Bear Brand Complex, where our programmers were. We called it that because it was full of animals. They used to basically live and sleep there while they were coding games and I'd go and sit with them, help them solve any coding problems they were having, giving them suggestions for things they could improve in their games... a support role, really.

A lot was riding on *Jet Set Willy* to be the killer hit that Software Projects needed. Did you spend much time with Matthew during its development?

No. Matthew was closed off and never talked about the game. He was an introvert anyway and he just went into himself. These days, you'd probably say he was clinically depressed. It was the pressure. He had got into making games for fun, like we all had, and the fun had stopped... but he was invested and he couldn't get out of it. One of his business partners in particular was a nasty piece of work.

You feel he was harshly treated?

The thing I hate from that time was when companies were ringing up asking why *Jet Set Willy* wasn't ready yet, because it had missed its delivery date a few times, and I was ordered to give them Matthew's home phone number, so they could ring him and ask him directly. I wasn't happy about doing that but I was told I had to. I feel really bad but I didn't have much choice.

Matthew's mum once told us there were always people hanging around their house at that time, pestering Matthew to buy them drinks. Is that how you remember it?

Matthew did like a smoke and he always had a nice supply. Yeah, a lot of people would come round and

» [ZX Spectrum] You can thank Chris' dad for the stepladder monsters on the tricky Warehouse screen.

» [ZX Spectrum] *Styx* was Matthew Smith's Speccy debut and came about after an introduction to Bug-Byte from Chris.

he was too nice, basically. I didn't like them. 'Ne'er do wells', as my grandma would call them. A bunch of losers. Every time I went round they were there, sitting in the front room, smoking. Parasites.

When *Jet Set Willy* did come out, it was a huge success, and work began on the next *Miner Willy* game, *The Megatree*. Did you ever visit Matthew, Stuart Fotheringham and Marc Dawson while they were working on it?
They were based in Holt Road, Alan Maton's old house. Yeah, I used to go over there, take my modem and we'd play *MUD* [an early online multiplayer text adventure game] all night. And no, I didn't see much work being done.

Stuart and Marc were sacked from Software Projects after *The Megatree* was cancelled and along with others like Steve Weatherill and Colin Grunes, set up Odin Computer Graphics. Did you keep in touch?
Oh yeah and I'm still in touch with them today, 35 years later. Colin was best man at my wedding! [...] I'd get the bus from Software Projects in Woolton and visit them at their offices in Liverpool. I'd often chat to the director there, Paul McKenna, who seemed like a nice guy, but not about anything he couldn't read about in the press. Tommy Barton somehow got to know about it and through some paranoid delusion thought I was giving away company secrets. To be fair, he knew what I'd done for Software Projects when I was still at Bug-Byte and thought a leopard doesn't change its spots.

Didn't Matthew stick up for you?
Matthew had his own problems. He wasn't actually there at that time. When I told him I'd been sacked, he was really surprised. He knew nothing about it.

The whole software business was having problems in the mid-Eighties, with companies like Imagine imploding spectacularly.
I think it all started with me getting sacked from Software Projects. That was the catalyst [giggles]. To be honest, I wasn't interested in the industry. It was a hobby for me, something you did with your mates, and once business got involved that's when it all started going wrong. We were a bunch of teenagers and we were taken advantage of, really.

You left the games industry behind at that point, though you had a long career in IT, and now you run tours of historical Liverpool (www.hiddenliverpool.co.uk). Have you ever considered doing a tour of key locations in the early games business, with Matthew drinking Guinness in one of the pubs for period detail?
[Laughs] I have actually done a couple. There's not too much left now but I could show you the site of Canning Place, where Bug-Byte, Odin and Thor were based, the Albany Building, where the original Bug-Byte offices were, and I'd take in some of the pubs where we all used to drink after work like Ma Boyles Oyster Bar. I also do talks in schools and to history groups and I do have a section about all the games companies that began in and around Liverpool. It really was the start of the games industry in this country.

Thanks to Paolo Santagostino for the introduction, Chris and Martyn Carroll for their help, and if you're ever visiting Liverpool, book a tour with Chris at www.hiddenliverpool.co.uk. ★

YOU ASK THE QUESTIONS

NORTHWAY: How did you compare yourselves to the US companies of the day and were you looking at markets outside the UK?

We were working mainly on British machines, based around the Z80 processor, and British gaming culture in the Eighties was very different to American culture. You look at some of the American companies, like Brøderbund and Big Five Software, they were very flashy in terms of presentation but the gameplay could be bland. Nowadays, all games are the bloody same, but back then in the UK we were trying to do different things. It wasn't just about writing a game – it was about moving things on and doing stuff we'd never done before. We never targeted the US market but thinking about it, Software Projects was massive in Germany and Scandinavia. We had a German distributor called Hergan Shmergen. That's the God's honest truth!

PSJ3809: Any stories about Matthew Smith that you can share?

No [laughs]. I didn't do that much partying with him and his mates because they were over on the Wirral, so I missed the famous toga party. We did go to this club Stairways a lot and we'd go to Milos, this heavy metal pub-cum-club, in a basement in St John Precinct. We had some good nights out in Liverpool, though to be honest, I can't remember most of them.

ELY: Does it bother you that most people associate Software Projects with Matthew Smith and his games and little else?

No. Every company needs a mascot and every company should be known for something. And to be fair, if it wasn't for Matthew, Software Projects wouldn't exist.

MERMAN: Is there a project you regret not finishing?

No. Everything pretty much got released whether it was finished or not [laughs].

Felony 11-79

DON'T HAVE A MAN, COW

» PlayStation » 1997 » Climax Entertainment

You can develop soft spots for some games for the weirdest of reasons, and the first game in the *Runabout* series – known outside of Japan as *Felony 11-79* – is a great example of why. This arcade-style driving game tasks you with retrieving objects, outrunning the cops and getting to a goal, all while under pressure from a timer. As you smash into cars and other objects, dollar values are applied to a running total of damage caused, tapping into the intersection between love of accountancy and destructive appeal that *Burnout* would more fully exploit later on.

But as much as I enjoy all of that, for better or worse, I've never forgotten *Felony 11-79* because of one particular sound effect. When I first encountered the game on an *Official UK PlayStation Magazine* demo disc (always a treasure trove of interesting experiences) I had good fun with it – but I kept coming back to it, and that was because the sound effect that played whenever you drove past the cows was so bizarre. It sounded distinctly like a man doing an impression of a cow, and this cracked me up because I was an adolescent boy.

I never got *Felony 11-79* back in the Nineties though, because the reviews put me off it. The problem with the game is that it's short – a good player can finish the entire thing in 30 minutes, and while it's fantastically entertaining while it lasts, it came out in the same year as games like *Final Fantasy VII* and *Gran Turismo*. PlayStation gamers expected more bang for their buck, and as a kid with limited opportunities to get new games, I was just the same.

Thankfully, the memory of that sound effect kept the game lodged in my mind, ready for when the experience on offer and the price it was offered for aligned with my disposable income, and I had a great time with it. That's why it's always important to look beyond the review scores and check the actual text, because the criticisms behind those scores don't always apply to your situation today. ✱

IMIT
sec.
TOTAL AMOUNT
$307,380
$1,000
FENCE
FENCE

>> There's lots of retro goodness this month as we've got the latest compilation from Digital Eclipse, a couple of Sega Ages games courtesy of M2 and a remaster of Burnout Paradise on Switch. Enjoy

✱ PICKS OF THE MONTH

DARRAN

Sega Ages: Thunder Force AC

The arcade version of the best *Thunder Force* is now on Switch, and I couldn't be happier.

DREW

The Last Of Us Part II

Lower your pitchforks, I know it's not retro. But as the mag's designated youngling, I will use this space to champion good modern games.

» [PC] Original ratio offers the fewest scaling artefacts, but light interpolation makes Full look great too.

Samurai Shodown NeoGeo Collection

A CUTTING-EDGE COMPILATION

INFORMATION

- **FORMAT REVIEWED:** PC
- **ALSO ON:** PS4, XBOX ONE, SWITCH
- **RELEASED:** OUT NOW (PC), 28 JULY (CONSOLES)
- **PRICE:** £31.99
- **PUBLISHER:** SNK
- **DEVELOPER:** DIGITAL ECLIPSE
- **PLAYERS:** 1-2

When we learned that Digital Eclipse would be working with SNK to deliver a *Samurai Shodown* compilation, we were quite excited – the previous partnership between the two companies, 2018's SNK *40th Anniversary Collection*, was a retro compilation that stood as a great example for any game developer to follow. The good news is that while *Samurai Shodown NeoGeo Collection* might not offer the same level of variety as that package, it does offer the same level of care and attention for the original games.

As you've probably guessed from the name, *Samurai Shodown NeoGeo Collection* contains all of the Neo Geo MVS games in the series. For the uninitiated, these one-on-one fighters are set in the Edo period of Japanese history and feature fighters loosely based on historical figures as well as wholly original designs. The style of combat in all of the games is based on high-damage strikes, which emphasise careful judgment of range and well-timed blows over speed and combo mastery. This was unique in the Nineties, and remains very unusual today. As you'd expect, the seven games here are fairly similar, with mechanical additions and character roster changes providing the major distinctions between each.

The most exciting game in the package is easily *Samurai Shodown V Perfect*. This third version of the series' fifth game has never seen an official release, having been pulled from its location test within hours, but is presented here in its finished form. The main draw of the game is a new story, which has been translated into English by Digital Eclipse, as well as some bug fixes that are more likely to be noticed by hardcore fans of *Samurai Shodown V Special*. While the changes are mostly subtle, it's definitely one of the coolest pieces of history we've seen in a compilation so far.

» [PC] *Samurai Shodown V Perfect* is the star of the pack, with new story scenes and endings.

BRIEF HISTORY

» *Samurai Shodown* was originally conceived as a scrolling beat-'em-up starring monsters, before being radically reimagined due to the early Nineties arcade trend for one-on-one fighting games. The first game in the series arrived in 1993, with three sequels arriving in 1994, 1995 and 1996. The series was then rested for a while before being revived during the Playmore era with 2003's *Samurai Shodown V* and 2004's *Samurai Shodown V Special*, the final Neo Geo cartridge release. The series has become one of SNK's most recognisable franchises, with popular characters such as Haohmaru and Nakoruru often included in the company's crossover projects.

» [PC] The arcade filter and HD Zoom are both turned on here – as you can see, they're quite subtle.

» [PC] Like the arcade filter, the TV filter's scanlines are pretty subtle in action.

WHY NOT TRY

▼ SOMETHING OLD
THE LAST BLADE 2

▼ SOMETHING NEW
SAMURAI SHODOWN (2019)

Games are presented with exhaustive options. The standard things you'd hope for are present and correct, such as button configuration, difficulty selection and save states for arcade mode play. You can also choose between Japanese and American regional releases, which is always appreciated. Local and online multiplayer options have been included for all seven games in the package. Online play in the period immediately following launch was rough, but the 1.03 patch greatly improved the situation and we were able to enjoy fast, stable matches.

A lot of attention has been paid to the appearance of the games, too. Attractive TV and arcade monitor filters are available, or you can choose to play with no filter at all. Screen ratio options are present, and a selection of borders are available to fill up your display. However, the greatest graphical trick that this release has to show off is the HD Scaling option. The sprites in the original games were designed to show their full detail up close, and lose detail as the camera zoomed out. With the increased resolution of modern HD displays, it's possible to zoom out while retaining the full detail of the sprites – and that's what HD Scaling does. It's a subtle effect, but one that does greatly improve the look of the games when enabled.

The front-end is very similar to that of the *SNK 40th Anniversary Collection* menu system, so it's simple but attractive, and easy to navigate. We also appreciate that Digital Eclipse has once again gone the extra mile in curating a museum mode that truly helps the player to appreciate the source material. As well as text summaries of the main games that cover both the in-game story and real-world development stories, artwork is present for even the most tangentially related spin-offs. There are also video interviews, pro match replays with helpful explanations of the action, and character profiles to view.

The only technical hitch we encountered was bizarre slowdown when the graphical filters were switched off. We discovered that our automatic settings had assigned the game to run on the integrated GPU rather than the GeForce one, and switching that fixed the issue – but it's worth bearing in mind if you're running on a low-end system. Beyond that, we can find little fault with the compilation. It might have been nice to allow players access to the AES modes of the games, or include the Neo Geo Pocket games, but frankly such complaints seem churlish in the face of such a focused, polished collection of games.

If you have any interest in the *Samurai Shodown* series, or the boom era of 2D fighting games in general, *Samurai Shodown NeoGeo Collection* comes highly recommended. The games are still very distinctive and enjoyable, and they've been presented with an exemplary level of care. The museum ensures that *Samurai Shodown* novices can get up to speed with the series and understand what makes it special, and the new features ensure that even veterans will have something to draw them in. Hats off to Digital Eclipse – this is the kind of release that every developer of retro releases should pay attention to, and maybe borrow a few ideas from. ✱

» [PC] The explanation of pro match replays is a feature other games should adopt.

TOURNAMENT: SIN SAMURAI SPIRITS WORLD CUP 2015 - FINAL MATCH
CHALLENGERS: KAMIKITAKOMARI (CHARLOTTE) VS D3D (HATTORI HANZO)
In this match up; we see the famous Samurai Shodown player D3D, known as the "Living Samurai II Wiki" in the Japanese fighting game community, against Kamikitakomari: a fierce and masterful Charlotte player. Charlotte can be a particular nasty match up for some players due to Charlotte's signature weak and medium slash range "poke" attacks and the speed they come out at. However, D3D's mastery of Samurai Shodown II mechanics pairs perfectly with Hanzo's diverse move set and will see him making some particular amazing plays in this fight to overcome Charlotte's strengths.
In round 1, Charlotte starts off strong by immediately attacking
SELECT
BACK

»[PC] The content in Museum mode is excellent, incorporating all sorts of interviews and documents.

»[PC] *Samurai Shodown IV* in particular shows SNK at the peak of its pixel art powers.

In a nutshell

***Samurai Shodown NeoGeo Collection* takes its brief and absolutely nails it. More than just a collection of classic fighting games, this is a loving tribute to one of SNK's most recognisable series – a playable history lesson of the highest quality.**

>> Score **92%**

★ PICK OF THE MONTH

Sega Ages: Thunder Force AC

» **System:** Switch » **Buy it from:** Online » **Buy it for:** £5.99

The latest game tackled by M2 for its *Sega Ages* range is an unusual one. Rather than start off life as an arcade game, *Thunder Force AC* is actually an update of the original Mega Drive classic that was first released in 1990 and then ported to arcades due to its success in the home market. Sadly, the original Mega Drive version of *Thunder Force III* – or 'the best *Thunder Force*' as we like to call it – isn't included here, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't shell out £5.99 for this excellent slice of shoot-'em-up action.

The most notable changes over the Mega Drive original are that you can no longer tackle the opening five stages in any order and that two stages, Haides and Ellis, are no longer available (there are new levels from *Thunder Force II* instead). The soundtrack has also been remixed, too, although if we're honest we do prefer the Mega Drive original. It's largely the same game, though, and as a result it's a tremendously fun blaster with a good range of power-ups (that can be switched between at will) challenging enemy waves and some truly memorable bosses with attack patterns to match.

If you've never experienced the game before we'd recommend the new 'Kids Mode' which increases the number of available credits, greatly enhances your firepower and allows you to keep your equipped weapon when you lose a life. Otherwise, you're best off sticking with the normal version of the game as you'll receive a far stiffer challenge.

Aside from the new game mode, *Thunder Force AC* has all the usual bells and whistles you'd expect from M2, meaning there are plenty of options to tweak, including adding scanlines, a number of different screen resolutions and even the option to play in a replica of the arcade cabinet. Online high scores are supported and there are even unlockable ships to discover, too. While the omission of *Thunder Force III* is a shame, this remains an essential addition to your Switch shmup library.

» Score **87%**

»[Switch] There are a number of different wallpapers to choose from to fill the unused screen space.

»[Switch] It's not the hardest shmup you'll ever encounter, but *Thunder Force AC* can still pack a punch at times.

Burnout Paradise Remastered

» **System:** Switch (tested)
» **Buy it from:** Online, retail » **Buy it for:** £44.99

The Switch version of Criterion's open-world racing remaster follows the versions released for other platforms in 2018, and we won't complain about seeing the game again. The remastered assets don't look quite as impressive on the Switch, but the ability to dip in for a quick, aimless session suits handheld play well. No compromises have been made to the all-important framerate, which stays at 60 whether you're running docked or in handheld mode, but dynamic resolution scaling can blur details in handheld mode. The only downer is paying such a premium for portability – that price is quite high.

» Score **82%**

Sega Ages: G-LOC Air Battle

» **System:** Switch » **Buy it from:** Online
» **Buy it for:** £5.99

This air combat game gives you one simple mission: blow up enough baddies before the time runs out. This is the first time *G-LOC* has been presented in arcade-perfect form on consoles, and the package matches the high level of effort we expect from M2. The emulation is extremely good and the game features a variety of display modes, including a cute motion cabinet simulation. The Ages mode isn't as revolutionary as some of the others we've seen – offering a far more action-packed version of the game – but it's a true improvement as it's tough to go back to the original gameplay once you've tried it.

» Score **80%**

Pushy And Pully In Block Land

» **System:** Switch (tested) PS4, Xbox One, PC
» **Buy it from:** Online » **Buy it for:** £9.99

Its title is a bit of a mouthful but *Pushy And Pully In Block Land*'s game mechanics are a lot easier to swallow. Each level is an arena that requires you to either destroy all the available blocks or defeat enemies by crushing them. Connect three blocks of the same symbol, however, and you'll receive a bonus that either offers points or makes it easier to dispatch foes. Some of the puzzles can get tricky, but much of this can be circumvented with the aid of a second player. Save restrictions are a pain and the bosses could do with a little more challenge, but we did enjoy our time with *Block Land*, and the soundtrack is delightful.

» Score **67%**

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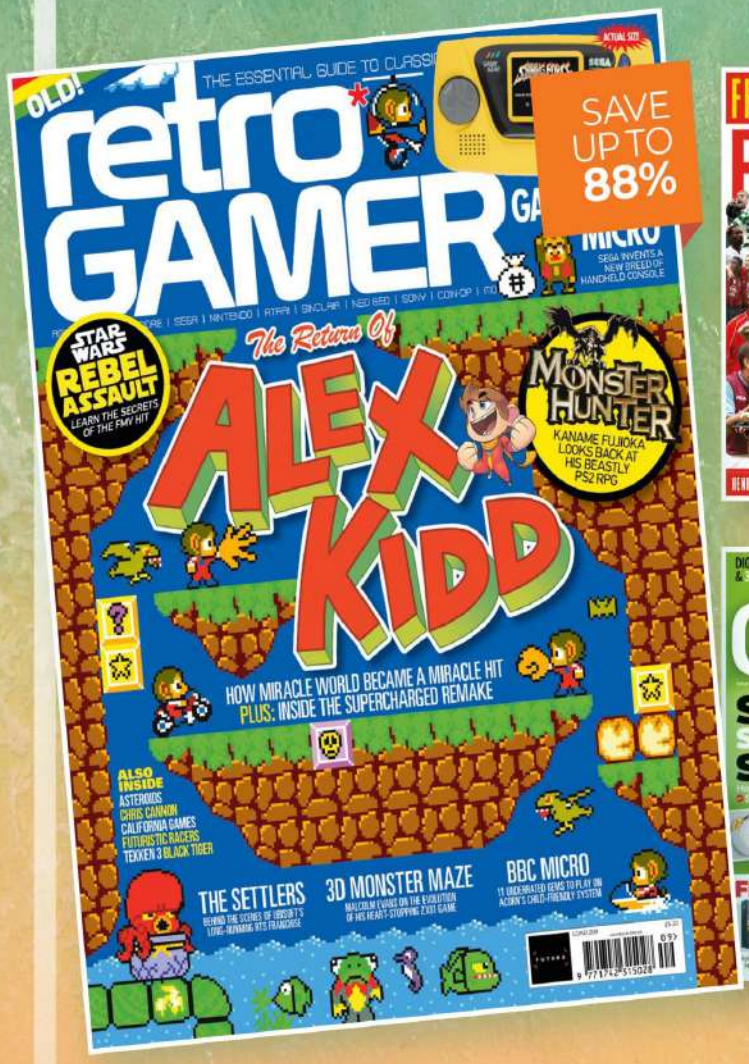

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STAR LETTER

NO TIME FOR RETRO

Hi **Retro Gamer**,
I've just read Paul Rose's article in this months issue of **Retro Gamer** and it almost brought me to tears. I'm in my forties and been an avid gamer since I got a Commodore 64 for Xmas in 1986/1987, but in a time that gamers would consider an absolute godsend, I have been questioning myself and my very existence as a gamer, and why I'm not absolutely hammering my collection? *Streets Of Rage 4*, I've played through once; my PC Engine Mini finally arrived and I haven't even opened it yet. I even dusted off my Saturn at the start of lockdown wanting to brush up on some of my Capcom fighters, but the dust has quickly resettled.

Your article almost brought me to tears because I was actually at the point of coming to terms with 'being too old for all of this' which I'm sure I've said before and I'm sure I'll say again, but thankfully your article has just hit me with the revelation of 'it's not just me'. We're just not wired for the world in its current state and what would be considered the norm is very far from the norm for us all at the moment. I know my games collection, old and new, will be waiting for me like it always is when all this is over. Your article just encapsulated this. Thank you **Retro Gamer**!
Phil Rowland

Hi Phil, we passed your email over to Paul and he was very touched by it. It struck a chord with us, because we've all had these sorts of thoughts and they've become particularly prevalent now. We're not expecting you to read it anytime soon, but we would like to send you a retro book once all this is over. Look after yourself and save those games for another time.

» [PC] Phil has been struggling to enjoy games like *Streets Of Rage 4*. Do you feel the same?

» [PS4] Don't ask Darran to choose between *The Last Of Us* and *Sonic*, you might not like his answer.

GOLDEN OLDIES

Dear **Retro Gamer,**
Having just seen a teaser for *Gran Turismo 7* pop up on my Twitter feed, I have had a sudden revelation as to why I cannot get into modern gaming. *Gran Turismo* is a game that I have just never got into. Since the first one was released in the late Nineties it has never appealed to me. It's the same story with many of the other 'big' games from around the Noughties onwards. *Mass Effect, Assassins Creed*, they're all 'meh'... So what gives? What is it about retro games?

Retro games, before you needed a staff of 300 to even produce a game; before you needed to play for three hours before you hit the 'opening credits'; before you needed an account and password to play a videogame, were one thing that modern games are not: fun. They were just *fun*. *Gran Turismo* is beautiful and authentic, *FIFA* is accurate and microscopically detailed, *The Last Of Us* has a deep and cinematic storyline, but if I had the choice between any of these and *Daytona USA*, *Sensible Soccer* and *Sonic The Hedgehog*, I'd go for the oldies all day long. I guess that's why I buy your magazine.
Keep up the good work!
Phil Richardson

While Darran would do everything to keep *The Last Of Us* in his collection, it's understandable that many modern games don't click with you. We think the biggest issue is that we've been playing games for such a long time that new ones have to feel truly special in order to wow us. Only half the team chose to watch the PS5 reveal for example, but the ones that did found some interesting looking games in amongst the usual fodder, so there's still hope for all us gamers.

GOTTA GO FAST

Dear **Retro Gamer,**
I loved the recently released *Sonic The Hedgehog* movie and feel it's one of the best videogame adaptations ever made [Is that you, Nick? - Ed]. I was delighted to hear that Sega and Paramount are going to be making a new movie and I'm going to preorder tickets as soon as it's available. Would you consider running an article on all the movie adaptations of videogames that have been made? I think it would be really interesting to read about and you could put the new *Sonic The Hedgehog* movie on the cover, too. [This has got to be Nick, right? - Ed]
James Kidd, Sonic fan

Thanks for writing in, James. While it's highly unlikely that we'd ever put any *Sonic The Hedgehog* movie on the cover, we do like the idea of covering all the film adaptations of videogames. Just before lockdown Nick was talking about the *Dead Or Alive* movie, so we're sure we could put something suitable together.

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ESSENTIAL READING

Hi **Retro Gamer,**

Firstly, the praise. Congratulations on such a fantastic magazine, I've been a subscriber for a long time now. I recently organised my bills, and I placed the subscription in the 'essentials' category, alongside food, electricity etc. Every issue is like a gaming history lesson or nostalgic journey.

Now, maybe you can help with something really random. I used to love football games for the Amiga: *SWOS*, *Kick Off 2*, the usual, but there was one called *Manchester United Europe*, by Krisalis Software. For many, many years now, I've told people about a player getting booked for arguing with the referee. I'm not sure how it happened, but I vividly remember it. The problem is, *nobody* else remembers it, even internet searches have no records of this. So, I was hoping, do any of your staff remember it? Or readers? Am I insane… or did this actually happen in the game? This has been bugging me for so long, it would be brilliant to finally get proof that it was indeed a feature of the game!

Best regards,

Darren Singleton

» We cant help with Darren's request, but did you know Krisalis' game was also known as *MicroLeague Action Sports Soccer*?

Cheers for your letter, Darren. Unfortunately nobody on the team has played this game before so we can't help you in this instance. Maybe one of our readers will have a better idea? This does remind Darran of the time he convinced himself he saw a *Star Wars* advert for Refreshers, where Yoda passed a tube of the sweets to Luke and they turned into a lightsaber. No one else can remember that, either.

MORE CONVERSIONS!

Hi there, **Retro Gamer.**

First of all, I'd just like to say well done on getting the magazine out during these very challenging times. Well done to your distribution team also, I ordered issues online and all arrived without fail. It's back on the shelves now in Ireland so all is good.

My favourite part of the magazine? Conversion Capers. I love the comparisons between different versions and the arcade original. I am also a patron to the *Arcade Perfect Podcast* and *Battle Of The Ports*. They also compare various versions of arcade conversions, so please look them up. Keep up the great work!

Regards,

John Ebbs

» [Mega Drive] Conversion Capers is a firm favourite with readers, so expect it to run and run.

Thanks for the nice words, John. We're aware of *Arcade Perfect* and *Battle Of The Ports* and you're right, they do a great job. Conversion Capers has always been a popular section of the magazine, so it won't be disappearing anytime soon.

DISCUSSED THIS MONTH

King's Valley

A few months ago we covered King's Valley in the news section of Homebrew. At the time we credited the game to the wrong developers and would like to correct that now. Mario Morra and Francesco Ugga are behind the game and we hope to look at it in more depth when Jason returns along with the Homebrew section in a future issue.

Your say

Every month, Retro Gamer asks a question on social media and prints the best replies. This month we wanted to know…

What's your favourite Alex Kidd game?

David Lightfoot

Miracle World. It was one of the first games I played on the system after it was bundled with it, much like *Hang-On*. It really felt like a massive jump from my trusty Speccy and I really felt like I was playing on one of the arcades from the funfair that rolled into town at home. Classic platforming action.

Jay X Trent

Alex Kidd In Shinobi World, because putting a wall jump in anything is akin to seducing me directly.

@shawnelestren

Anything that isn't the apple-cheeked, creepy-as-hell westernised version.

Jono McNeill

Miracle World. It's the game that got me hooked on Master System and led me to collect the full set.

@SirDelboy

I'm very fond of *Miracle World*, but *Shinobi World* just shades it for me. Nice visuals, a great soundtrack and lovely sense of humour and nods to the *Shinobi* series make it stand out. I'd love it to get the remake treatment next!

Simone Caronno

For some strange reason, my dearest *Alex Kidd*-related memories are connected to *High Tech World*. I was a kid looking for stories in my videogames and already had worlds to explore with *Ys*, *Miracle Warriors* and *Phantasy Star*. I always found *HTW* a bit difficult to control, nonetheless the adventure spice of that game always won me out. Looking for map parts in the castle, praying a hundred times at the temple… I was in an age where those things weren't just happening in a videogame that was projected on a screen. They were *happening*.

@NeilGeoGaming

Miracle World. It's the one that most of us have nostalgia for. Still a playable little game, too!

Dennison Seeto

I loved *Alex Kidd In Miracle World* because I still remember my older sister being able to finish the game (with me watching in awe), where as I always got stuck at the Bingoo Lowlands.

@MrDeanP

Its got to be *Alex Kidd In Shinobi World*. Blending those two worlds together was an absolute stroke of genius with a soundtrack to match.

Steve Hardy

Miracle World, as it was 'built-in' to the Master System. This was used as an excuse for my parents not to buy any other [games] for a while, so, I got quite used to playing that one.

@BrittRecluseuk

Miracle World for me. The music, smoothness and directness of gameplay combined with the colourful visuals still stand up. *Enchanted Castle* on the Mega Drive, however, is as much fun as watching someone eat a boxing glove in slow motion.

retro GAMER

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Printed by William Gibbons & Sons Ltd, 26 Planetary Road, Willenhall, WV13 3XT

Distributed by Marketforce, 5 Churchill Place, Canary Wharf, London, E14 5HU www.marketforce.co.uk Tel: 0203 787 9001

ISSN 1742-3155

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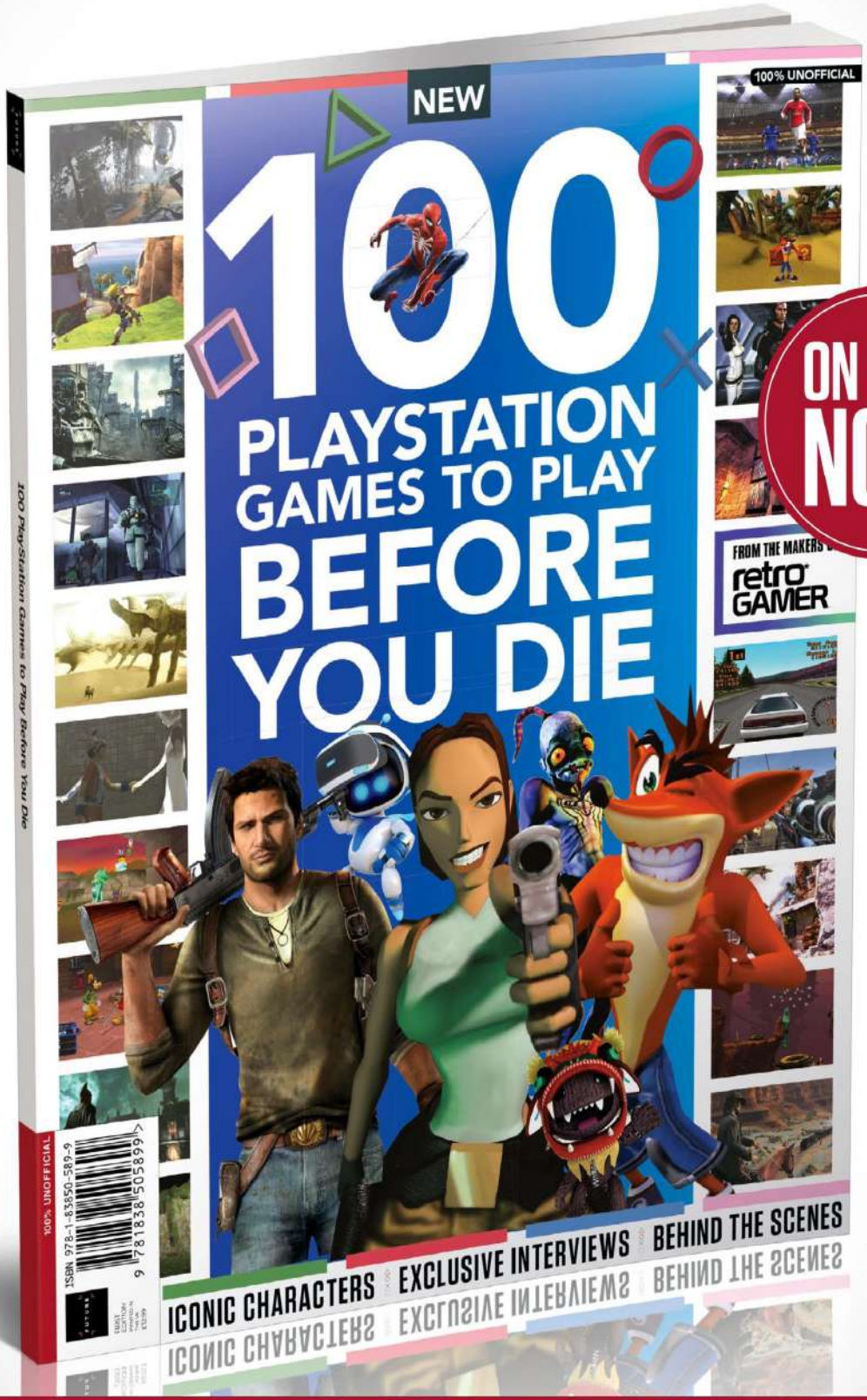

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ENDGAME

CHEW-MAN-FU

» That dastardly wizard-type chap, Chew-Man-Fu, has put a curse upon everyone – a curse that means they can't have egg rolls and fried rice. What's more, he's backing up his curse with a menacing menagerie of porcupines, penguins and whatever else GW Zoo didn't want. So now it's up to you, the hero, to go defeat them and return the food. How does that go? Let's skip to the end and see...

01

» The titular villain has been defeated, hooray for the hero! Rather upset at having lost to what appears to be a small child, ol' Chewie there tells us that he wants us to have bad dreams. Isn't he so sweet?

02

» But as he disappears, he tells you that he doesn't just want you to have nightmares – his curses will actively *give* you nightmares. That's more than a little disconcerting, so our hero seeks the advice of a wise old man.

03

» Unfortunately, the wise old man just wants to feed our hero some rice. That's lovely and all, but our hero is still rather concerned with the idea that she's sacrificed a lifetime of peaceful sleep to get that rice back.

04

» "Master, his threat is making me uneasy," our hero worries. "The curse took away our food, so its power is real. I can't help but dread the thought of falling asleep." The wise old man considers his response. "Nah, it'll be fine. Here's a cloud, go ride it around the world."

05

» But as our hero sets out, she can't help but be tormented by the villain's parting message, and starts to actively resist sleep. Honestly, the wise old man could do with some retraining to better handle mental health issues. The nightmares might never come, but the terror is in not knowing.

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